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The Beverley Nichols Omnibus

OXFORD – LONDON – HOLLYWOOD

EVENSONG

A Novel

BY

BEVERLEY NICHOLS

JONATHAN CAPE
THIRTY BEDFORD SQUARE
LONDON

TO

GEORGE MOORE

IN HOMAGE AND GRATITUDE

PART I

THE SINGER

CHAPTER ONE

I

'Is there anything in the paper?'

The woman who asked the question was white-faced and peevish. The railway carriage in which she was sitting was so cold, even for January. Nor had she yet recovered from one of the worst Atlantic crossings she could remember. It was only three hours since they had docked at Southampton.

The mild-looking man to whom she had spoken, blinked. Really, his wife should not ask questions in such a loud voice. There were two other people in the carriage . . . a grey-haired American and a pretty girl with very rosy cheeks. They must certainly have heard her. Not that she had said anything dreadful . . . but in England people did not say things in railway carriages at all, at least, not audibly. This brazen behaviour on the part of his wife distressed him. He feared it meant that she was having one of her moods. He regarded her timorously from under his eyelids, folded the newspaper and gently handed it to her.

'I haven't my glasses,' she observed, in acid and extremely resonant tones. 'Can't you read it for me?'

This was really dreadful. She actually *was* having one of her moods. She knew how he hated pushing himself forward, and here she was demanding that he should make a public exhibition of himself. He looked quickly and fearfully at his travelling companions. The grey-haired American was leaning back, with folded arms, gazing at a monochrome of the sea-front at Blackpool. Being somewhat short-sighted, he was mistaking it for the ruins of Ypres, which accounted for the expression of cultured pathos on his face. The girl was looking out of the window, searching the darkening fields with bright eyes, as though some adventure awaited her in the hurrying chiaroscuro. Both persons, to the little man, looked highly suspicious. He was sure they were listening to every word.

'Of course, if you're too tired. . . .'

He blinked again. He knew that voice . . . like an angry little whistle. There was nothing for it but to humour her. With hands that trembled slightly he lifted the newspaper to his face, and murmured:

'£250,000,000 Plans for Electrification of Britain.'

'I can't hear a word.'

Feeling worse than ever, he repeated the sentence. It was a horrible sentence. He said 'elictrecifation' instead of 'electrification,' and he was sure the American smiled. His wife said:

'What do I care about that? Besides, it won't be done. Nobody ever does anything in this impossible country. I don't know why we ever came back. They can't even heat the railway carriages. What else is there?'

He scanned the paper. 'Little Princess Elizabeth . . .' he began nervously.

'For heaven's sake don't tell me anything about *that* child. . . .'

'Really, my dear. . . .'

'Find something about somebody one knows. All our friends can't be dead. Hasn't anything happened to anybody?' The tone of her voice indicated that by 'anything' she meant 'anything unpleasant.'

He searched desperately. There was a story about a man who boiled his wife in tar, but one did not know *him*. He rather wished one did. Ah! here was something. He read:

'Irela to give Farewell Opera Season.' He pronounced the word correctly . . . Irayla.

'What . . . *again*?'

It was evident that this item of news was more to the taste, not only of his wife, but of another occupant of the carriage. For the rosy-cheeked girl turned quickly from the window and stared at him with wide-open eyes, as though he had addressed her personally.

'It's too ridiculous,' she snapped. 'She's been giving farewells for the last twenty years. Read out what it says.'

He sighed and read as follows:

IRELA TO GIVE FAREWELL OPERA SEASON

£50,000 CAST

Laughing excitedly as she paced up and down her exquisite Adam music-room in Charles Street, Mayfair, Madame Irela, the world-famous soprano, to-day revealed her plans for bringing opera back to London.

'I've done it!' she cried. 'At nine o'clock this morning I signed the contract for the biggest season of opera that London will have seen since the war.

'Covent Garden? No. Not *Covent Garden. I want to be independent. So we have taken the Imperial Theatre, and we begin rehearsals next month.*

'Sing myself?' Her eyes shone with such youthful ardour, that it was difficult to believe that Irela was a star long before the dawn of the present century. 'Sing myself?' she repeated. And then, spontaneously she darted to the piano, struck a chord, and sang, as though in challenge to the audacious questioner, the opening phrases of the 'Cufietta Rosa,' from the second act of La Bohème. *All the old Irela brilliance echoed through the room in that enchanted moment, and the listeners were spellbound.*

Responding to questions, Irela admitted that she would herself take the leading rôles in La Bohème, Faust, *and* Othello. *'I* may *sing Juliet, too,' she added. 'It depends on the weather!*

'And another thing!' She held up a finger on which glittered the celebrated yellow diamond which had been presented to her by the late Tsar of Russia, 'I have

engaged Baba Letoile, the new Spanish soprano, to sing some of the rôles of which I am growing a little tired.'

The Evening Clarion *understands that the expenses in connection with the forthcoming season will amount to not less than* £50,000.

He finished reading, and glanced timidly over his shoulder. The rosy-cheeked girl was staring even more openly than before. Really, somebody ought to speak to her about it. One day she would stare at a man who . . . His wife interrupted his thoughts.

'She must be sixty if she's a day.'

'Oh, surely not more than fifty.'

'I'm fifty-eight,' she intoned, observing his embarrassment with relish. 'And I heard her forty years ago in Paris, when she was just becoming famous. If she is only fifty now, then she was only ten when I heard her, which is rather early to develop a double chin and a top C, apart from the question of being seduced by Faust.'

'A remarkable woman,' he ventured.

'How anybody can pay to hear her nowadays I can't imagine.'

'We heard her only three years ago, and her voice was still wonderful.'

'Yes. But what *in*?' She beat a tattoo on the floor with her cold feet. '*Voi che Sapete*, which must have been specially written for old women. When she sang anything with trills, or high notes, it was like an elderly canary forgetting itself.'

'Oh, come. . . .' He was sure that girl was going to join in the conversation.

'And now she's dragging out all those old operas again! *Faust* and *Bohème* and *Romeo* . . . in 1931! After we've heard *Roussalka* and *Rosenkavalier* and *Sadko*! It's too ridiculous. It wouldn't be possible in any country but England, where no *prima donna* is taken seriously until she's wheeled onto the platform at the Albert Hall in a bath chair, to sing to a forest of ear-trumpets. Why did we ever come back to this country? Why did *she* ever come back to it, either, when everybody knows that her *cher ami* is still in Africa, for which I really don't blame him, considering that he . . .'

What she might have said next will never be known. For at this point the girl in the corner leant forward and spoke. Her cheeks were scarlet and her voice trembled dangerously. She said:

'Would you mind deferring this discussion? I am Madame Irela's niece.'

II

The train pounded on through the darkening fields, and Pauline Joycey – for that was the girl's name – stared out of the window, seeing only the silver arrows of rain that struck the glass, splintered, and dribbled downwards. Nothing would induce her to turn her head. True, the little man who had read from the newspaper was still begging her pardon, clearing his throat, and shuffling about in great confusion. But the woman had said nothing at all – had merely stared at her insolently, shrugged her shoulders, and closed her eyes.

A sense of intolerable strain pervaded the carriage. They were all thinking furiously. The woman was thinking that the journey had not been really quite so boring as she had feared. The man was thinking that if this did not teach his wife to hold her peace in public places, nothing would. The American was thinking that the legend of impermeable English reserve appeared to be a little over-rated.

Pauline herself was seething with outraged loyalty. That hateful woman! Daring to malign Irela! Casting slurs on her great, her almost mythical kinswoman, whose photographs, in innumerable attitudes, had adorned the wooden walls of her late father's ranch in Canada! And what was that phrase she had used . . . *cher ami* . . . did not that mean, in Europe, something horrid? She did not think much of Europe if it prostituted so sweet a phrase as 'dear friend' to an ignoble meaning!

It was too, too bad. When she thought of all that Irela had done for her, was still going to do for her!

III

Irela, sitting up one dim November morning, in her scarlet lacquer bed, with a London fog looming through the peach-coloured curtains, opened a letter and screamed. She pushed her lace boudoir-cap away from her forehead, tugged a pillow behind her, read some more of the letter and screamed again. A little red-faced woman bobbed out of the bathroom and regarded her with alarmed surprise. Noticing her, Irela cried:

'Tremlowe! Get me my lawyer, Mr. Hackertson, on the telephone. Quick!'

While Tremlowe was getting the number, Irela shuffled indignantly out of bed, put her feet into a pair of ermine-lined slippers, drew a quilted satin dressing-gown over her shoulders, inside out, and read the letter to the bitter end. Just as she had finished it the telephone bell rang. She snatched the receiver from Tremlowe, and began to speak.

Even the combination of the telephone, the early morning, and a bad temper could not rob Irela's voice of its unearthly charm. It was like the voice of a little boy, an angelic little boy, and even if Irela had not been a dominating woman, she would have been forced on many occasions to use stronger language than she would normally employ, simply in order to counteract the sweetness that echoed, willy nilly, from her throat. Bitter experience had taught her that people were only too inclined, even when she was scolding them, to be lulled into an irritating trance by the sound of her words, entirely ignoring their content. So she had learnt to say 'damn,' like a trumpet blast, and this usually fixed their attention.

'That damned brother-in-law of mine,' she cried to Hackertson, in her little boy's voice, 'has left fifty thousand dollars' worth of debts. What'll we have to do about it?'

A consoling growl came from the other end of the wire.

'I can't hear a word you say,' she snapped. 'Speak up.'

While he spoke up she raised her eyes beseechingly to the ceiling, as though to pray for patience, and jogged the telephone up and down. Then she cut him short again.

'I know all that.' The little boy's voice sounded very angry indeed. 'I know my sister left him a hundred thousand five years ago. I know he ought to have been shot. I only want to know if I shall have to pay it.'

Irela, from the first moment she read the letter had decided that she *would* have to pay it. She was a proud woman, and she was not going to see her family disgraced. A nice story that would make for the papers. 'Irela's brother-in-law dies in poverty.' Besides, there was Pauline, who, as far as she remembered, was a charming girl, with a very fitting appreciation of the honour of being the niece of the greatest singer in the world. Oh, yes, she would pay, and look after Pauline, and all that, but she had not the least intention of announcing this as *her* decision. She must be persuaded by Mr. Hackertson, apparently against her will. Then, if anything went wrong, she could always say, 'I told you so.'

Mr. Hackertson, who had been her legal adviser for nearly forty years, was well aware of these tactics. He knew what was expected of him. He would say, 'You must pay,' and she would tell him that she would have to sell her tiara with the pink drop pearls, and then he would remind her that she had more than enough standing on deposit in each of at least six American banks, and then she would talk about 'the income-tax man,' and finally she would ring off in a vile temper. He calculated that he would get the cheque before lunch. He did.

Pauline knew nothing of this. All she knew was that suddenly, like an angel out of the skies, Irela had come to the rescue. The debts were paid, the farm sold up, and she herself, with a little money 'to go on with,' was summoned to England. Irela, with a delicacy she did not always show, realized that Pauline might feel that she was dependent on charity. So she had suggested that Pauline should be her unofficial private secretary. For six weeks Pauline slaved at revising her shorthand, which she had already mastered at college in Montreal. She prayed – oh, indeed, she prayed that she might be of some use.

The train was now passing through the suburbs. A string of domestic cameos drifted by, and in each of the cameos was a table, covered with a green cloth, on which reposed a fern. (How different from Paris, where the arriving traveller, peering insolently through the windows that pass him by, is impressed by the fact that every room he sees contains an enormous bed! How different, too, from Berlin, where a similar fleeting inspection reveals only a series of dark caverns, deeply etched, where vast walls are pockmarked by windows that appear uninhabited, yet, one knows, are only the preludes to mysterious, brooding adventures!)

The people in her carriage began to shuffle about. The American reached to the rack and brought down a shiny, efficient-looking suitcase. The horrible woman rose to her feet, stamped once or twice to revive her dormant circulation, swayed, and sat down again. Her husband nervously placed his glasses in a case, which he put in his vest pocket. He muttered something to his wife, who sniffed. Then, as though acting on a sudden inspiration, he turned to Pauline. He spoke quietly, almost with dignity:

'I cannot tell you,' he said, 'how sorry I am that this has happened. It was quite inexcusable. . . .'

'Please don't apologize.' Pauline was not looking at him. She was looking at his wife, coldly, haughtily. 'It wasn't your fault.'

'I myself,' he went on, 'have always regarded Madame Irela as . . .'

Pauline interrupted him. 'I think that Madame Irela is quite capable of looking after herself. . . .'

Her eyes were still fixed on the stony profile of his wife. Then, suddenly, that profile was lit by many misted lights, and cut by dark shadows. Through the window she saw a vast cavern, with crowds hurrying, and rows of pale faces that glided by like ghosts. The train had arrived at Victoria Station, and this was, in itself, so exciting an event that the little storm in the railway carriage seemed absurdly unimportant.

There was a jerk. The American opened the door. She shivered in the cold.

IV

The train was ten minutes late, and had Irela been awaiting an ordinary visitor she would have been extremely annoyed.

Other emotions, however, had warmed her breast. She was, for example, enjoying a warm glow of sentimentality. Forgotten was the fact that she had always thought her late sister an insufferable bore, and her late brother-in-law a sponging blackguard. Forgotten the fact that her sole use for the sister had been to play childish practical jokes upon her – to lead her into pharmacies in Paris and encourage her to ask for embarrassing implements. This tiresome relation of the past had faded into obscurity, to be replaced by a vague and ectoplasmic entity who answered, in her memory, to the generic name of 'sister,' and called, from Irela's pulsing heart, an unwonted throb of emotion.

'Sister's' orphan daughter was seeking refuge in her bosom. 'Sister's' little girl was coming from the darkness to the light, to bask in her fame. That was how Irela dramatized the situation. Hence her appearance at the station.

It was not only sentiment that stirred Irela. Many people had recognized her on the platform, and this, she felt, was quite as it should be. Doubtless it was due to the announcements of the opera season in the evening papers. She thrilled at the thought that she was once again in the limelight. For two years – ever since her farewell season at the Metropolitan in New York – she had been lying low. A 'Welcome Home' concert at the Albert Hall, eighteen months ago, had been her last big public appearance. 'Big' it certainly was, for the vast hall had been crammed from floor to ceiling, and she had never sung more superbly. But it was high time she sang again.

She walked this way and that, noting the nudges, the whispered comments. In the background stood a footman in dark-green livery watching her, holding a sable rug over his arm, occasionally glancing back at the waiting car, which was a pre-war Rolls. Why should Irela, with her wealth and her smartness (she had even engaged the footman because he looked so pale and dissipated, and somehow she felt that dissipation, in footmen, reflected an aristocratic aura on their employers) why should she cling to this old car? For the very excellent reason that it was unique. Everybody knew that if she chose she could have Hispanos plated in platinum and Isottas with onyx bodies and such Bentleys as only bad boys dream about. Nobody, however, noticed new and expensive cars. But everybody noticed her Rolls. It was almost equivalent to a patent of royalty. It was far more effective even than Lord Lonsdale's yellow and coroneted chariot, which always gave strangers the impression that his Lordship was touring Mayfair with a new line in ladies' hats.

Pride, sentimentality, and irritation . . . these were the dominating forces in Irela's breast at the moment . . . and as the train continually failed to arrive, irritation began to oust the other emotions. But now there was a stir around her, people were moving forward, there was a shrill whistle, porters ran about, here was the train at last, and here . . . why here, running straight towards her, was Pauline. She held out her arms and cried 'Darling!' Her eyes were wet.

They looked at one another.

Irela saw a fresh, intelligent young woman of about twenty-two, dressed simply in black. To her great relief she observed that Pauline was pretty, but not too pretty, and that she was a 'lady.'

Pauline's first impression, on looking at Irela, was one of sumptuous untidiness. Irela's hat was of exquisite simplicity, decorated only by a chaste Cartier pin in diamonds. But strands of deeply dyed black hair escaped from underneath the brim. Her sable coat, too, was perfectly cut, but the collar was rumpled at the back. On the lapel a spray of orchids hung crookedly. Round her neck hung three perfect ropes of flawless pearls. They badly needed pulling into place.

But it was not with these details of dress that Pauline, in this first moment, concerned herself. Rather was it with Irela's face and figure. She was a short woman, still inclined to rotundity, though far slimmer than she had been in her prime. But there was nothing rotund about her face. She wore absolutely no make-up, and this seemed to accentuate the clear-cut features. The nose was sharp, the lips thin, the cheek-bones had a high, Indian contour. Only her chin betrayed her age. Had it not been for her chin, Irela might have looked under fifty. As it was, she looked nearer sixty.

'That creature in the railway carriage was right. . . . She *is* an old woman!' So Pauline thought, and was shaken by a strange, sudden tremor of sympathy. 'And she is just embarking on the biggest operatic programme of her whole career!' Impulsively she put out her arms, once again, and drew this famous little sable-cloaked woman to her.

Then Irela, suddenly dispelling the mists of sentiment which were gathering round them, snapped in a high, sweet treble, 'John!'

'Yes, m'lady?'

The dissipated one was fawning before her.

'Go and see about Miss Joycey's luggage.'

'Only a cabin trunk,' said Pauline, 'with my name in big yellow letters.'

Palely he departed.

Pauline had spoken a little absently, being somewhat perturbed by the expression 'm'lady.' Had Irela married again . . . a nobleman? Had she been knighted? No, she remembered, women could not be knighted. What, then, could it be? Perhaps Irela guessed her thoughts. For she said, a little self-consciously:

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'They all *will* call me "my lady." Isn't it absurd?'

'I think it's rather nice,' said Pauline, still puzzled.

'You see,' confided Irela, 'it always used to be "Madame." But then, somehow, after the war, with all those Dames and things, Madame sounded rather pompous. So then Arthur Kober – he's a genius, darling, and is dining to-night – said that as I was the Queen of Song I ought to be called your majesty.' She laughed, her high, twinkling, little boy's laugh. 'But that was too, *too pomposo*, so I thought it would be best to compromise on "my lady." The servants like it, you see.' She looked at Pauline a little defiantly.

'I still think it ought to be "your majesty," ' said Pauline, and Irela was enchanted, and thought, 'What a divine niece I have,' and 'Blood will tell,' and 'Where is that damned John?' Pauline followed up her success by asking about the opera, but Irela said that it was such a long story, and all so exciting, that they must keep it until they got home.

John arrived, having located the luggage, but he said that they must wait yet another five minutes before it could be placed on the car. Conversation therefore flagged, as it will on such occasions, and Pauline glanced round at the new and fascinating people who jostled her on all sides.

Then suddenly, through a gap in the crowd, she saw a young man of exceptional comeliness pushing his way in their direction. But it was not his face which attracted her attention. Any girl who has lived for long in a Canadian University town soon becomes immune to masculine good looks. Rather was it the fact that he was smiling . . . yes, actually smiling, and at her.

She smiled back. She had not the least idea who he was, and she did not very much care.

He pushed a little nearer to them. He lifted up his hand, smiled again, and pointed to Irela. He seemed to be anxious to attract her attention.

Pauline put her hand on Irela's arm. 'Look,' she said. 'There's a friend of yours trying to speak to you.'

'Where?' said Irela. She peered in the direction of the young man. She was rather short-sighted, and she did not wish to put on her glasses in public.

'That young man there . . . look . . . he's just got through the crowd.'

He had indeed got through the crowd, and was standing only a few feet before them, in a space made by the luggage. And he was holding a camera into which he was peering, focussing it upon them.

'Oh!' cried Irela, high and shrill. 'Oh!' And then she stepped forward, raised her arm, and brought it down with all her force on the young man's hands.

Instantly there was uproar. The camera crashed to the ground with a sound of breaking glass. People surged round them. The young man staggered back, white and bewildered. Only Irela held her ground. She stood there, facing the young man, straight as a ramrod, with cheeks flushed an angry red.

'How dare you try to photograph me?' she cried. 'How dare you?'

'But, ma'am. . . .' Pauline by now was at Irela's side. She felt very frightened. What on earth had the young man done? From his accent he was an American, and he certainly looked harmless enough. But perhaps he was an anarchist in disguise?

Irela screamed, 'Sneaking round me like a thief . . . trying to photograph me. . . . I won't have it. . . . I won't have it, I tell you. . . .'

'But, ma'am, how was I to know that you . . .'

'How were you to know?' Her voice rose higher and higher. 'Because every editor in Fleet Street knows. Because I won't have libellous pictures of me published in the papers or I shall sue the papers. Because yours isn't the first camera I've knocked out of a man's hands. And it won't be the last!'

Irela paused, breathless. The young man picked up his camera, shook it, made a wry face, put it under his arm. As he did so, a queer glint came into his eyes. He stepped closer to Irela and raised his hand. For a terrible moment Pauline feared that he was going to strike her. But he was only commanding attention. He got it.

'You're a great singer,' he drawled, 'and I'm only a bum freelance photographer. So I suppose it doesn't matter to you that you've just broken the only means I've got of earning a living. Still, I'd just like you to know this, that if it saves me from coming in contact with any more dames like you, you'll have done me the best turn I ever had done in my life. Good afternoon.'

He stared at her with cold contempt. As he turned away, his eyes met Pauline's, held them for a minute. Then quite unaccountably he smiled, raised his hat, and was gone.

Irela did not move. She stood very erect, tapping her foot on the platform, running her small gloved hand up and down her ropes of pearls. She glared around her with such ferocity that the crowd, fearing further temperamental assaults, quickly melted, not without sniggers. Suddenly she spied a small, elderly man with mild features and white hair.

'Mr. Toms,' she shrilled.

The little man turned, raised his bowler hat, and advanced to her, saying, 'Madame!'

'Did you see that, just then?' said Irela, snatching away her hand which he was kissing.

'That, just then?' He blinked at her.

Impatiently Irela explained. She wanted to know who the young man was. He must be ruined. Mr. Toms, being the doyen of musical critics, and the most knowledgeable man in Fleet Street, knew everything. He must find out.

He did. In a few moments he had ascertained from a colleague that the monster who had tried to photograph Irela bore the ignoble name of Donald Gage, that he was an American of the lowest order, and that he had a sort of roving commission as a photographer for the despised New York *Clarion*, from even which humble port he would shortly be dislodged.

'Dear Mr. Toms!' crooned Irela. All the honey had returned to her voice, all the angry red had drained from her complexion. Her eyes were moist and kind. As she gave him her hand to kiss she was like a ripe but still desirable princess who had just been rescued from a position of intolerable danger.

Over an almost deserted platform they swept triumphantly to the car. As she sank into the cushions Irela drew most of the sable rug over her, leaving Pauline a row of tails which barely covered her right knee. She smiled wistfully. 'They never stop persecuting me,' she smiled sadly. There was a timbre about her voice, as she said it, that made Pauline clutch her hand, spontaneously, protectively. . . .

V

But as the car swept through the streets, blurred and golden with the rain and the lights, Pauline leant forward and said softly, 'Why were you so angry that he tried to photograph you?'

Irela withdrew her hand and her face hardened. She did not look at Pauline, and Pauline, glancing timidly at the tense, carven profile, wondered what she could be thinking of, to bring so bitter a shadow across her face.

Irela's thoughts were cruelly simple. She was wondering how long the game could be kept up. Oh, this fake, fake . . . how sick she was of it all! For a moment she felt as though she might take Pauline into her confidence, tell her something of the unutterable weariness of the perpetual struggle to keep her supremacy when her voice and her body were both growing old. Too early yet, she thought. So she said sharply:

'I photograph very badly.'

Pauline looked surprised. 'But I've seen some lovely photographs of you.'

'Not snapshots,' said Irela, rather grimly.

'No . . . but still . . .'

'It's like this, you see. I've accustomed the public to have a certain idea of what I look like, and it's much best that they should keep that idea. I've got a favourite profile, a favourite full face, and a favourite three-quarter face. Those are the ones that I send out for autographs. Then I've got some others for the press – all done by one man – Mr. Loope.' This candid confession ended in a sudden gleeful laugh. At the thought of Mr. Loope, all Irela's troubles seemed to vanish. '*There's* a genius, darling,' she cried. 'You must go to him.'

Mr. Loope was indeed a genius. No other man could cause his camera to lie so delicately, could so adjust his lens that instead of reproducing Nature it gave a sly wink and produced, from its magic circle, endless poses of beauty.

She had discovered Mr. Loope about ten years ago when, for some unaccountable reason, she had begun to put on flesh. He had induced her to come to his studio for a complimentary sitting. And it was, indeed, one of the most complimentary sittings that can ever have been given by a photographer. When Irela received the proofs, she was enchanted. Could this slim, delicious being, as willowy as the pillars against which he had diffidently placed her, really be herself? Could this attenuated and spiritual wisp, who stared at her with enormous, glowing eyes, really, *really* be herself? A hasty examination of certain untouched features, such as the nose, the cheek-bones, and the hair, revealed the fact that it was indeed herself, and that all Mr. Loope had done was to catch her at certain becoming angles which had, apparently, escaped the notice of less observant photographers.

A less hasty examination might have revealed other secrets of Mr. Loope's technique; might, indeed, have caused the examiner to suggest that Mr. Loope must have used the knife on Irela – or, if not the knife, at least a very powerful piece of india-rubber. For over certain portions of Irela's anatomy there hovered, even in the finished proofs, a faint but unmistakable mist. This mist, at her chin, was no larger than a man's hand (and no smaller). Round her neck, it swelled somewhat, hovering like a malicious aura against the clear-cut line of Mr. Loope's imagination. Over her behind it gathered force – so much force, indeed, that Mr. Loope, after his operations, was forced to paint in again large sections of background which this part of Irela had obscured. But it was over Irela's chest that the cloud became really menacing. Faced by this protuberance, Mr. Loope had gaily taken his india-rubber (or whatever substance photographers may use) and had drawn it in an ecstatic curve over the negative, leaving in its wake a form of unexampled elegance.

It was a profile picture, and the result, at first sight, was enchanting. Mr. Loope, however, had forgotten one thing, which was that Irela, at the time, was wearing her celebrated pearls. The proof revealed the disturbing fact that these pearls, after Mr. Loope's activities, shot out in an almost horizontal position, and were then lost in the same cloud which had engulfed Irela's figure. What was he to do? He could not – artist though he was – paint a whole row of pearls, falling against the slim sides which his artistry had brought into being. There were limits even to his genius. So he decided that the only thing a gentleman, and an artist, could do, was to paint them out altogether.

Irela never noticed the difference.

VI

The car drew up at Charles Street, the chic and dissipated John sprang out and removed the sable rug, the door opened revealing a very purple butler and a very pale footman. Irela walked in quickly, crying as she walked, 'Tremlowe, Tremlowe!' The high, sweet note fluttered up the lofty stairs, like a questing bird.

Pauline was to learn, very quickly, that the sense of hurry and rush and excitement which now pervaded the house was a normal accompaniment to Irela's existence. Irela's friends lived lives not unlike those of railway porters – they were always being summoned here and there, they were usually carrying something for her, there was always a great deal of noise, and the tips at the end were frequently disappointing. Yet, just as one has only to lift one's finger at a railway station to obtain the services of twelve stalwart men, so Irela had only to lift her finger to gain the consolation of a dozen new friendships.

Charles Street was more like a railway station than ever, at this moment, with Pauline's trunk being brought into the hall, and Irela supervising the directions.

'No – *not* in the lift,' she was crying. 'The lift's just been newly lacquered. I can't help it if it is heavy – you must take it up the stairs. James . . . why do you let Dingley do all the work? *Really!* No – not like that – *over* your shoulder – why don't you stoop down more – mind, *mind*! You'll knock over that vase. Well, take it away then. Percy! Why do you stand there doing nothing? Why don't you take away the vase? No, don't put it on the stairs . . . really, was there ever such stupidity? It's perfectly simple. It's not heavy at all . . . if you would only *stoop* . . . there, that's better . . . fancy it taking three strong men to lift a little trunk like that. . . .'

While this invigorating monologue was in progress, Pauline took the opportunity to look round at her new home. It seemed to her quite delightful, and indeed it was. Irela, who had been born without any great natural taste, had been sensible enough to take advice. Boni de Castellane, years ago, had lent her his aid when she had been furnishing an apartment in Paris, and had steered her tactfully away from the worst horrors of the Second Empire, past the treacherous shallows of the Directoire, into a quiet and conventional haven of Louis Seize. What he had done for her in France, others had done in England. As a result, she now knew whether a thing was good or bad, and had achieved, through long discipline and study, the judgment which is vaguely called 'good taste,' by which we mean a combination of qualities partly antiquarian, partly commercial, wholly fashionable, and only incidentally connected with art.

Charles Street was decorated 'in the best of taste.' It was an Adam house, and Irela had taken great pains to obtain the correct shade of Adam blue-grey. Everything was charmingly simple and exceptionally 'good.' There was some very fine Queen Anne furniture – the red lacquer cabinets in the music-room were museum pieces – some extremely beautiful Louis Quinze *boiseries* – and some quite delicious painted Italian chairs. She had not many pictures, but what she had were worth having, if somewhat mixed. In the hall there was a very decorative Granacci and one of the finest Antonio di Ducci fragments in existence. There were some lovely Guardis in the dining-room.

'Tremlowe . . . Tremlowe,' cried Irela, and again her voice drifted like a questing bird. This time the quest was successful. A little red-faced woman in a black dress hurried downstairs, saying, 'Yes, m'lady, yes, m'lady,' on every other step.

'This is Miss Joycey, Tremlowe. You must look after her properly.'

'Yes, m'lady.' Tremlowe gave Pauline a feeble smile.

'Give Tremlowe your keys, darling, and she'll unpack for you.' Pauline did so.

'Now come and look at all my pretties,' cried Irela, and before she knew where she was, Pauline was being rushed up to the music-room. She exclaimed at the beauty of it as soon as she entered the room. But Irela was not paying any attention to her. She slammed the door dramatically and then stood quite still, with her finger to her lips.

'Those servants . . . they'll kill me!' She spoke in a harsh whisper that was quite devoid of the Irela 'quality.'

Pauline was greatly distressed. 'Why . . . has anything happened?'

'Happened?' Irela gave an extremely mirthless laugh. 'Didn't you notice Dingley's neck?'

'Dingley?'

'Yes . . . the chauffeur. Didn't you notice his neck?'

'I don't think . . .'

'Really, darling!' Irela spoke quite impatiently. 'It was bright red. *Bright* red! I can't think how anybody could have failed to notice it. Still, I suppose, being your first day. . . . Anyway, when Dingley's neck is red it's a sure sign that he's been drinking.'

'Oh, dear!'

'I don't know what to do,' bewailed Irela. 'I've told him about it. I've told him that he might at least remember that when he's carrying *me* he's carrying rather a precious burden. . . .' She sank disconsolately into a chair.

'Indeed, indeed he should!' agreed Pauline fervently.

'Will you speak to him about it, darling? Not now . . . but next time?'

'Of course.' Pauline wondered what was the precise etiquette for informing chauffeurs that their necks were too red. Perhaps she might carry a piece of pink material about with her and tell him that he could grow so pink, but no pinker. She checked the thought as irreverent.

'That'll be part of your duties, darling,' said Irela. 'I *can't* do everything. This opera season alone. . . . I shall kill myself. . . .'

'Anything . . . anything I can do. . . .'

'There's John, for example,' she continued. 'The first footman. Very smart, didn't you think?'

'Yes . . . he certainly is.'

'So unhealthy looking,' added Irela with relish. 'Bad blood, I expect. But that's not the point. I don't mind him looking pale and tired, but he fights with Percy, that's the second footman. And the butler – his name's Scott – my dear, he's a half-wit – utterly unable to keep them in order. You *must* see to it.'

'I'll do my very best . . . as soon as possible.'

'Darling!' Irela gave her a charming smile. But her face quickly clouded over again. 'What's the *use* of a butler if he can't keep order? They don't respect him. That's what it is. Mrs. McPherson – she's the cook, and a *great woman*, most economical too, and adores *me* – she said, "How can we respect Mr. Scott? When he doesn't even respect himself?" '

'Can't you get rid of him?' inquired Pauline gently.

'Yes – if I can find another – but where *are* all the butlers?' She looked at Pauline quite fiercely. '*I* don't know. One would think, with all this unemployment, and houses being closed down right and left – you'd think there'd be thousands of butlers only too *eager* . . . but I don't know where they are. Nobody can get a decent butler. I don't know what we're coming to.'

'How long have you had Tremlowe?' asked Pauline, hoping that this would prove a more agreeable subject.

'Thirty years,' snapped Irela. 'And it's thirty years too long. She forgets *everything*. I might as well dress myself . . . in fact I almost do. Do you know what she did this afternoon? She sent me out with a hole in my glove!'

Pauline registered a becoming dismay.

'Oh, but that's nothing to what she does sometimes! She puts out odd pairs of stockings. She lets buttons come off my shoes and then doesn't discover it till she's doing them up. Besides, she hides things. Oh, yes, she does! I'm quite certain that she does it on purpose. She's probably hiding things of yours now. We'd better run upstairs and stop her!'

Already Irela was on her feet, and at the door. She darted to the lift and pressed a button. It groaned up. They stepped in. The lift was like a brilliant jewel-box, flecked with gold, softly lit. They arrived at the top landing, and walked down a corridor.

Pauline's room was not large, but it was charming. It had primrose-coloured walls, and the curtains were grey *toile de Jouy*. The furniture was modern painted Italian except for a Sheraton writing-desk. Tremlowe was bustling about the room, spreading out Pauline's clothes . . . which were few and simple . . . on the bed.

'Haven't you finished *yet*?'

'I wasn't quite sure where Miss Joicey wanted . . .'

'Supposing I help Tremlowe?' suggested Pauline.

'Oh, very well.' Irela sighed, prepared to say something, thought better of it, and then gave Pauline a particularly charming smile. 'I'll leave you for a little bit, darling.'

'You must be tired yourself,' said Pauline.

'Tired?' She laughed . . . and this time it was the true Irela laugh, the little boy's laugh. 'I'm never tired. Still, I'll rest till dinner. At eight.' She turned to the door. Then she came back, and put her hands impulsively on Pauline's shoulders. 'I hope you'll be happy here, darling. . . . I do so hope you'll be happy.'

CHAPTER TWO

I

DINNER was almost over. The top lights had been turned out by John, the pale footman, who looked more dissipated than ever ('Really,' thought Irela, 'those circles under his eyes – *too* chic!'). The room was now lit only by four unshaded candles in tall Waterford candlesticks. There were no flowers on the table. Irela never had flowers on her table, because, as she said, 'I don't like carnations in my soup.' The real reason was that she had heard – she could not quite remember where or when – that flowers on dining-tables were *bourgeois*. She had also observed personally that in the 'best' houses – by which she implied the dreariest, the dampest, and the least sociable – there were no flowers on the table. *Ergo*, she had no flowers.

There they sat, Pauline, Irela, and Arthur Kober. Pauline in white, Irela in scarlet and diamonds, Kober in an old velvet dinner jacket. However, you never noticed what Kober wore. He was too remarkable a personality. As soon as Pauline set eyes on him she felt, 'Here is a man who is destined to play a part in my life.' She studied him closely.

Arthur Kober was a Russian of the old regime. His real name was Koberoff. He was brilliant, ugly, fiery, perverse. He lived on his nerves and his overdraft. Some women soothed the former, others appeased the latter. Many women regretted both. His life was a spectacular prelude that never seemed to resolve into a second movement.

Red-haired, hideous, with hands that trembled alarmingly and an upper lip that twitched to curious and forbidding smiles, he yet remained a boy – the bad boy of the family, or rather, the bad boy of no family; for his father, his mother, and every human being he loved had been butchered in the Revolution. He was alone in the world, except for a little white French wife, with big, black, burning eyes, who worshipped him.

You would not have guessed his nationality, for he spoke with an Oxford drawl. And by some strange instinct of self-torture, he constantly announced to the world that he was a Bolshevik. His whole being quivered with loathing of the men who had destroyed his country, yet he never lost an opportunity of paying them a weird allegiance . . . speaking with a sort of hiss, through half-closed lips.

'You see, I'm a Red,' he would whisper to respectable persons.

'Speaking as a Bolshevik . . .' he once snarled, to an eminent gathering of the Royal College of Music. And, as a result, his somewhat heterodox conclusions on the counterpoint of Berlioz had met with an unwonted respect.

It was as though he deliberately lacerated himself

. . . purposely kept open the wounds that time would never heal.

He was speaking now, quickly, abruptly, leaning over the table so that the candle-light cast shadows under his nose, making it look more enormous than ever. He emphasized his remarks by waving his right hand, which trembled as though he had the palsy. Yet there was no sign of a tremor in his voice, as he said:

'This must be your *last* farewell, Irela.'

Irela looked at him indignantly. 'What do you mean?'

'You know very well what I mean.'

Irela was not quite sure whether she ought to be angry. Really, Kober said such impossible things. In front of Pauline too! She crossed her feet nervously under the table.

'I've never given a farewell before,' she said. 'I'm not like' – (and here she named a woman who is still annually saying good-bye to the concert platforms of the world, in ever shriller accents). 'I'm not like *her*, I hope! *She's* been saying farewell, for the last time, every season since the war. And her voice said farewell to *her* long before the war was ever heard of. I hope you're not accusing me of that?'

'You have said farewell before.' His voice was smooth as ever.

'Not to *opera*,' she replied sharply.

'No. Not to opera. But your name has been placarded on huge posters all over London, all over New York, all over the provinces, with the word

Farewell on it, in very large type, on more than one occasion.'

'But with the words "prior to world tour" underneath,' she retorted.

To which he added: 'Yes, in very *small* type.'

'Arthur Kober,' she said, 'you'll make me lose my temper.'

'I'm sorry. I only want to get the thing quite clear. Is this to be the last time you sing or not?'

'In opera, yes.'

'Does that mean you're going to go on singing opera, from the concert platform, when this is over?'

'I haven't decided.'

'If you do, you oughtn't to use the word "farewell." You, above all people, oughtn't to juggle with that word.'

'Juggle with it?' Irela, quite definitely, was preparing to be very angry indeed. 'What do you mean? I'm an honest woman!'

Kober flinched. '*Don't* say you're an honest woman, please, Irela. You're always saying you're an honest woman.'

'I *am*!'

'Who cares whether you're an honest woman or not? There are millions of honest women in the world, boring the world to death. Why debase yourself to their level? It isn't clever of you. If you say it – as you do – as a sort of common gesture, the great artist using a vulgar phrase just to heighten the fact that she *is* a great artist – then I suppose there's some point in it. But for heaven's sake don't tell *me* you're an honest woman, because I'm not interested. All I care about is that you should be an honest artist.'

She sat up very erect, and tapped her fingers irritably on the plate in front of her. She was not looking at him. Then suddenly she swung round, looked him straight in the face, and cried:

'Why are you saying these things? Why are you harping on this wretched word? Why mustn't I ever sing again when this season is over?'

He returned her gaze without flinching. 'You know why,' he said quietly.

For a moment they stared at one another. Then her eyes fell, and she bit her lip. Pauline had a terrible feeling that she might cry. But no. For when she looked up again her face was hard and bright. She lifted a glass of champagne to her lips, and laughed. 'If I had ever been told that I should allow any man to speak to me as you've spoken to-night, I shouldn't have believed it.'

Kober shrugged his shoulders. 'Divine lady,' he sighed . . . and still the hand shook, perpetually, before him . . .'I am not talking to *you*. I am talking to the greatest artist who ever lived.' Irela's expression softened a little. '*You* are not concerned in this. I have no interest in *you*. I am merely interested . . . no, interested is not the word . . . I am passionately devoted . . . to a voice. That voice has been acclaimed, by the world, as the most lovely sound that echoes in the world to-day. It is. And all I want is to be sure that when it echoes for the last time, it will be still as sweet as ever. . . . Do you understand?'

Irela put her hand impulsively on his. 'Don't,' she whispered . . . 'you'll make me cry.'

'I don't want to make you cry,' said Kober. He spoke almost coldly, yet his eyes were suspiciously bright. 'I only want to make you live . . . for ever . . . in history.'

II

They went upstairs to the music-room. Long, lofty, with a shining floor on which the shadows flickered from a bright fire. A Steinway piano stood at each end of the room. There were immense waxen Madonna lilies in the corners, that drenched the air around them with sweetness.

'Phew!' cried Irela, clattering over the uncarpeted floor, 'the room stinks. Open the window, darling.'

Pauline went to the window, opened it a fraction. Outside, London glimmered darkly, a faint orange glow over the huddled roofs.

'Now we've got to talk business,' said Irela, settling herself in a high-backed chair covered with faded yellow brocade. 'You'd better listen, Pauline. It'll be useful to you.'

They all sat down. During the next half-hour the room rang with the two voices, Kober's quiet and vibrant, Irela's always like a little boy's, but saying things a great deal sharper than a little boy would say. For there was, apparently, nothing that she did not know about the commercial side of opera, nothing that she had not considered. They discussed percentages, matinées, the number of seats to be allotted to the pit, the box to be set aside for the Royal Family, the price of programmes, the possibility of a general election. Kober, with all his experience, all his Jewish quickness, found himself frequently pulled up on a question of detail.

'Two guineas isn't a penny too much for stalls on the opening night,' she was saying sharply. 'I could get three.'

'It puts the press against you.'

'Nonsense, Kober. I know the press better than you do. The press are dears. Besides' – and here she winked at him – 'the press don't have to pay for their seats.'

He conceded her the point. 'And what about the ordinary nights? Are Irela nights going to be more than Baba nights?'

'Don't be a fool! Of course not! Do you want me to hand that woman a stick to beat me with? If you have lower prices for Baba nights, all those damned old women in Kensington will be going to her instead of coming to me. "Five shillings saved," they'll say. "That'll pay for a taxi there and back." And it'll start a chain of thought in their heads. Give an old woman in Kensington a chance to save five shillings and she'll murder her grandmother. No, Kober. I'm not a fool. I know my British public. Baba and I fight on equal terms.'

'Fight?' He looked at her, his eyebrows raised.

She realized that she had said more than she intended. So she laughed, a little self-consciously, and replied, 'No, of course not. There's not going to be any of *that* sort of thing in any season I'm connected with. All I meant was that we must make no distinctions – none whatever. Besides,' and she rather wished that she had thought of this before, 'Baba might be terribly offended if they charged more for me than for her. That's a very important point. It wouldn't be . . . well, it really wouldn't be at all the thing.'

'Quite.'

The fire crackled softly. Through the windows drifted the blurred hum of London. Pauline felt very happy, very thrilled. For the first time in her life she was 'seeing behind the scenes.' She clasped her hands, listening eagerly for more.

Irela was playing with her rings. Quite casually she said, 'By the way . . . about Baba. . . . I've never heard her, you know. What's she like?'

'Very Spanish. Rather sensational.'

'Sensational?' She still fidgeted with her rings.

'Well – F in alt, and all that sort of thing.'

Irela looked up, and sniffed. 'Is she an artist?'

'No. And the voice doesn't move me, personally. But it's an astonishing voice, all the same.'

'What does she look like?'

'Rather like a pink dumpling. She's broader than she's long and her eyes are like saucers. She wears an enormous blister pearl of a rather dirty shade of yellow on the first finger of her left hand. She has a great penchant for oddly coloured wigs on the stage – there's a sort of mauve one she always wears for *Rigoletto*, and a marmalade-coloured one for *Lucia*.'

'We'll soon have *that* off her,' said Irela grimly.

'It oughtn't to be difficult. She's very tractable.'

'Can she act?'

'Certainly. With both arms, and both legs.'

Irela became suddenly arch. 'Will she cut me out, Arthur? Will she cut me out?'

Quite gravely he said, 'She'll get a lot of applause.'

This was not quite the answer she desired. Perhaps he realized his mistake, for he added quickly, 'The idea of comparing her with you is, of course, too fantastic for me to consider.'

Which appeared to satisfy her. For she said abruptly, 'Who's she sleeping with?'

Kober looked reproachfully at her, then at Pauline. 'My dear lady . . .'

'Oh, never mind, Pauline. You don't care, do you, darling?'

Pauline laughed and said 'No.' She was blushing a little – she could not help that – but she terribly wanted to fit in. So, with a great effort, and with mantling cheeks, she said, 'Do tell us who it is that she . . . well . . . you know . . .'

At which they both laughed very agreeably.

'Sovino,' said Kober. 'He happens to be her husband.'

'*What?*' Irela stared at him, looking extremely annoyed.

'Why – what's the matter with that?'

'He's conducting *Bohème*. And he'll conduct abominably just to spite me.'

'What nonsense!'

'It isn't nonsense. It's happened to me before. If a conductor's in love with one *prima donna* he takes jolly good care to conduct badly for the *prima donna* he's *not* in love with. Otherwise he'd get his eyes torn out. Oh, this is terrible!'

'Well . . . if you feel that way about it. . . .'

'I certainly do. Sovino shall *not* conduct for me. That's the first thing I shall have to attend to.'

'Why don't you have an *affaire* with him yourself?'

Instantly her mood changed. She was entranced by the suggestion – toyed with it whimsically, with many high laughs and bird-like trills. Playfully she ruffled Kober's hair. Pauline was fascinated, bewildered, but not really shocked. For after all, was not her aunt an 'old lady'? And did not Pauline, in the strange innocence of youth, assume, as a law of nature, that 'old ladies' did not have *affaires*?

In the middle of Irela's antics John came in, put down a tray of whisky, Evian water, barley water and gingerbread biscuits. He regarded Irela mournfully from under his black-ringed eyes and said, 'Will there be anything else to-night, m'lady.'

No. There would be nothing else to-night.

'I'm going to have some whisky,' said Irela. 'And get toxy-boo.'

Kober frowned at her. 'That's against all rules.'

'Thank God it is.' She splashed the soda into the glass.

Kober stared into the fire. For a moment there was silence. Then he said:

'How often do you intend to sing yourself?'

'Three times a week.'

Kober still stared into the fire.

'Well?' Irela rose to her feet and stood by the mantelpiece. She tapped her foot impatiently on the fender. 'I suppose you're going to tell me that's too much?'

'It is . . . at any rate . . . enough,' he said slowly.

'Really! What nonsense! I'd guarantee to pack that house if I sang every night for two months.'

'I wasn't thinking about your packing the house. I was thinking about the strain on yourself.'

She laughed, rather harshly. 'Anybody would think I was a hundred, the way you talk.'

'We're none of us as young as we were.' He turned to Pauline and smiled. 'The sight of this young lady makes me realize my own decrepitude rather acutely.'

Irela said 'Pshaw!' and poked the fire irritably.

'Anyway,' added Kober, 'you know your own capacities best.'

'I should hope I do. And I'd trouble you not to tell me what I'm able to do and what I'm not. I *know*!' She drew herself up proudly. She made a strange figure there, with the poker still in her hand, and the diamonds sparkling round her wrinkled throat. 'I haven't been singing all these years without learning a *little* about my own voice. Besides, it isn't as if I were going to sing anything very difficult. *Bohème* is child's play to *me*.'

'What about *Faust*?'

'Well – what about *Faust*?'

His eyes shone – strangely. He seemed suddenly intensely alive. He looked at her as a doctor might look, examining her for some hidden weakness.

"'The Jewel Song,'" he said. 'That's hardly child's play.'

'No?' She opened her arms, trilled, ran up the tiny scale which opens that foolish, exquisitely sugary song, and paused. . . . 'Wasn't that all right?'

Still he leant forward, searching her with his eyes. 'Will you sing it, as you used to sing it, with a mirror held high above your head, waltzing across the stage, and taking the trill on B flat at the end?'

She threw him an acid look over her shoulder. 'I haven't the faintest idea how I shall sing it,' she retorted. 'I shall sing it perfectly, that's all.'

'And what about the quartette at the end? That's hard work, you know, at the end of four acts. With all those top C's. And Piccolo will be singing against you, with a voice like a bull. . . .'

'Oh, please *stop*!' She stamped her foot. 'Haven't I sung it for donkey's years?'

'That's just it,' he said. 'You have.' And there was an almost sinister note in his voice.

Irela flinched. Had she been alone she might have spoken more frankly – she might either have abused him in the coarsest language, or she might have spoken to him frankly, and asked his advice, perhaps his help. But Pauline was here, and she could do neither of these things.

Pauline was indeed here. Pauline also realized instinctively that some sort of crisis was impending. And so, with a tact extraordinary in one so young, and with a daring even more remarkable, she suddenly rose to her feet, and said, in a trembling voice:

'Auntie . . . it's terrible of me . . . but could you *possibly* . . .' She could not finish the sentence. She could only look very shyly, very sweetly, first at Irela, and then at the piano.

She could not have done anything more exquisitely apt. Irela's heart warmed to her. Not, of course, that she showed it at once. She would not say, 'Of course, darling, I'll sing for you.' She would not say that, firstly because half her attention was still angrily engaged by Kober, secondly because a very long experience had taught her automatically to say 'No' whenever she was asked to sing for nothing. So she merely said, in comparatively amiable tones, 'What is it?'

Pauline stood there trembling. Had she done something dreadful? She could not tell. She could only whisper, very shyly: 'If you could . . . just a tiny song. . . . I know I shouldn't ask . . . but it would be such an honour.'

Honour! She had chosen the one, the only word! Honour! It was this which Irela had lacked throughout this curious evening. The honour and glory – the bowed head and beseeching gesture – the way made clear for the Queen of Song – the obeisance, the curtseying, the hush when her lips were parted. Honour! 'Yes,' she thought to herself, as she glanced proudly at Kober, 'a little more honour could be paid by you, to me!'

She gave Pauline a melting smile. 'But of course, darling,' she murmured. She gulped the rest of her drink. Another scornful look at Kober. Another melting smile at Pauline.

'Take my glass,' she murmured. She glided to the piano.

III

She was flushed and excited. Her hair was untidy. Her dress bunched up at the back. Yet, such was the aura of magic about her, such the legend that lingered, the romance that was implicit even in the ruined profile – that profile which had glittered on so many millions of gramophone records . . . (you remember them? They bore pink labels, and they cost ten shillings and sixpence, and when you turned them on they scraped terribly. Yet, through the scraping and the buzzing, Irela's voice would drift triumphantly, like a sunbeam that steals through the harsh clouds) . . . Such, as we said, was this latent spell, hanging about her, that she had only to move towards the piano, to open her lips, and the air seemed to be filled with the ghosts of forgotten songs, crowding through the ether with golden wings, to flutter about her and pay her homage, lending the faint and tenuous sweetness of memory to glorify the loveliness that lingered still in her throat, but was dying . . . dying.

She struck a chord.

She said 'Damn.' Then, with creaking archness she swung to Pauline and apologized for the naughty word. A high, dry laugh ended the apology. Then, pretending to mince and pout, like a little girl, she turned to Kober and said, 'Can't sit on stool. Stool too high. Irela can't sing on high stool.' She pursed her lips at him. Pauline, loyal, thrilled, wished that she would not purse her lips like that.

Kober glided over with a high-backed chair. She stood up. He placed the chair in position. She thanked him, tapped him playfully on the arm. Then, he was dismissed.

She sat down again. The atmosphere was tense. But not quite tense enough. She struck a chord. Pauline, longing to savour to its full this exquisite moment, tried to shut her eyes, tried to lean back, prepared to drift away. Yet, she could not drift. Even when the chords softened, modulated into the first phrases of the aubade from *Le Roi d'Ys*, she could not drift. She bit her lip with impatience. What was the matter with her? Here was a moment that might never repeat itself. And the moment was passing her by.

Then, she noticed Kober. He was sitting with hunched shoulders and folded arms, deep in a chair near the fire, facing Irela. There was the shadow of a smile on his face, and it was a bitter smile. In that moment Pauline realized the secret of this strange unrest that filled her, this *malaise* that ruffled her spirit. It came from Kober. Not that he was hostile . . . she did not feel that. It was simply that he was outside, detached . . . impervious to the spell. Pauline felt like a young spiritualist at a séance who is suddenly made aware of the presence of a sceptic. It was as though she said to herself, 'The spirits will not come . . . not to-night . . . there is an unbeliever . . .' And yet, not an unbeliever. Had he not obviously been sincere when he had spoken of his adoration of her voice?

And then the voice came. It stole through the room like a spirit . . . there was, indeed, the sense that some radiant and exquisite child had come to them from another world, and was unfolding silver scrolls of song on whose pages the pale notes glittered. Oh, the futility of words, of printed words, that flutter like dead leaves in the breath of that voice! And yet, the voice, even in memory, compels those words to flutter from the lips of all those who heard her . . . compels the one to compare it to a flower unfolding, the other to a moonbeam dancing . . . and will compel all men in whose ears it echoed to search their souls for metaphors, until the last echo in the last soul is stilled and even the memories of that beauty which she created are lost in the ultimate Silence.

IV

Kober walked across the room when the song was over. His footsteps creaked on the bare, polished floor. He bent over her hand and kissed it. He said nothing.

Irela's laugh – delighted, nervous . . . almost shy, rang through the room.

'Well . . . well . . . do you like me?'

'I can't speak.' Pauline's voice was broken. Indeed, she could not. There was nothing to say.

'It's a pretty song,' said Irela.

It was extraordinary, this embarrassment that possessed them all. As Pauline grew to know Irela more fully she learnt to expect this embarrassment as a natural consequence to Irela's singing. There was about it the quality of a religious revelation – and when the revelation was over, and the glory had departed, the listeners were abashed.

Irela did not sing again, and shortly afterwards Kober departed.

'What do you think of him?' asked Irela as they went upstairs.

'He's very clever, isn't he?'

'Sometimes I'm inclined to think he's a little too clever.'

Irela stared for a moment down the stairway, as though she were making sure that Kober had left the house. Then she sighed and turned to Pauline.

'Well . . .' she said. 'D'you like me?'

'Oh, my dear. . . .' Pauline laughed and kissed her good night. Like her? Already she worshipped her.

But as she lay down in her bed, and stretched her tired limbs through the cool linen sheets, it was not

Irela's face that drifted before her, nor Irela's voice that rang through her brain. It was the face of a very angry young man in a grey slouch hat, and a voice that muttered, 'You're a great singer and I'm only a bum freelance photographer!'

Curious conflict between the æsthetic and the physical . . . between the known and the unknown, between Irela and . . . who? What was his name? Donald . . . Donald . . . ah, Donald Gage! Lately attached to the New York *Clarion*. Pauline felt ashamed of herself for thinking of him . . . still more ashamed when she realized that she would terribly like to see him again. She told herself that she must not think of these things, that she must go straight to sleep.

But there were a great many monograms on Irela's sheets and Irela's pillows . . . hard, elaborate, expensive monograms that tickled the chin and aroused the fancy. The letter 'I,' when entrusted to the monogramaniac, is capable of astonishing evolutions, well calculated to disturb the rest of the most placid. It was a long time before Pauline succeeded in arranging the monograms so that she could fall asleep. And even her dreams were delicately entwined by the image of Donald Gage . . . smiling, and whispering, 'When shall we two meet again?'

CHAPTER THREE

I

IRELA sat up in bed, scratching her head, which was partially covered with a cap of Venetian point lace. On a table by her side was the remains of her breakfast . . . a half-drained cup of orange juice and some yellow anti-starch biscuits. She wore a huge pair of glasses with tortoiseshell rims, through which she regarded Pauline with a very business-like expression.

It was a week later – 2nd February, to be precise – and barely a month remained before the opera season was due to open with Irela in *La Bohème*. Things were therefore beginning to move quickly, as may be gathered from the orders which Irela was now issuing. Pauline, scribbling feverishly in her note-book, could barely keep pace with them.

'Tell Mr. Vernon –'

'Mr. Vernon?'

'Yes . . . my business manager. Please don't interrupt, darling. Tell him that I have heard *definitely* that their Majesties will be present on my opening night.'

'Oh, how wonderful!' breathed Pauline.

Irela smiled graciously. 'Tell Mr. Vernon that the theatre *must* be properly decorated. Pink roses all round the dress circle. But the Royal Box must be done in pink carnations because they are the Queen's favourite flower.'

Pauline noted the fact.

'Tell Mrs. McPherson,' continued Irela, 'that she put too much salt in the cauliflower polonaise. It didn't matter so much yesterday, but if I had been singing it would have been *fatal*. Rub that in. Tell her that salt is *fatal* when I sing. Tell her the crème caramel was delicious, and just as I like, especially the crackly part. Lady Gorridge wants the recipe. Send it her, with my love. But don't forget about the salt. *Fatal!*'

She picked up some letters which were lying on the bed.

'There's a sweet sailor here who wants my photograph. Such a touching letter! His mother is paralysed and he wants five pounds to unparalyse her, or whatever they do. Of course we can't send him five pounds, but send him my *deep* sympathy, and the photograph of me kneeling down, in white, singing the "Ave Maria." What a comfort the fleet is!'

However, the comfort was not, apparently, lasting, for she quickly frowned, and threw Pauline a bundle of other letters. 'All from people who want me to hear them sing,' she snapped. 'Really, one would think I was a school-marm!' Her eyes brightened. 'That's rather a good phrase. Why not write and say "Madame Irela thanks you for your kind letter, and regrets that she is not a school-marm"?'

Pauline hesitated. 'Don't you think it might offend people?'

Irela sighed. 'I don't know. Perhaps. People are so touchy nowadays. Look at that!' She threw her another letter. 'A most insulting letter from a wretched vicar of some place in the East End asking me to sing, and more or less taking it for granted that I will. Did you ever hear anything like it?'

'There's another letter asking you to sing. . . .'

'My dear, there are always forty letters asking me to sing.'

'What am I to do with them?'

'Anything you like. Only don't give them to me. Now take down this letter. It's to Mr. Toms, my press agent.'

Mr. Toms? Was that not the man whom Irela had sent to destroy the young photographer? Pauline flushed, and her hand trembled slightly as she took up her pencil to write:

Dear Mr. Toms,

How is it that hardly any advance photographs of me have appeared in the evening newspapers? I have seen several in the morning papers and the magazines, but it is fatal . . . (underline fatal, darling) . . . *to neglect the evening ones. People read them at lunch and tea, when they are in the city, and are in the mood to buy tickets.*

Also please do not *use 'The Irish Nightingale' as a title to any of the pictures. It does not sound chic. I have not really cared to call myself 'The Irish*

Cl Acc No: 15833

Nightingale' since King Edward died, for it was he who gave me the title, and even that was largely for political reasons. Ireland can get on quite well without my assistance. I cannot carry the Empire on my shoulders.

Who is putting in all those silly stories about Baba Letoile in the gossip columns? It could not of course be you, *but I should like to know who it is, because they make the poor woman look ridiculous. The one about her wanting to go to the top of St. Paul's Cathedral and sing a psalm is not only vulgar and incredible, but extremely annoying to me personally, because she is a member of my company, and if she starts singing in the open air she will catch cold, and that would involve a breach of contract. Besides, it would offend the religious people.*

Anyway, there is probably a law against singing on the top of St. Paul's. You really must contradict it.

In any case I do not wish Baba Letoile to have her chances spoilt by advance publicity. When she has shown us what she can do, we will be able to help her. Not that she will need much help, because all the Spaniards have taken seats to give her the biggest claque . . .

'Claque?'

'Yes, darling.' Irela spelt it for her. 'That's what they call the people who are paid to applaud. . . . Do go on, and don't interrupt.'

the biggest claque that's ever been heard in England.

She shuffled among the letters. 'Bills . . . bills . . . heaven knows how I shall pay them. . . . That'll have to do now, darling. Get on with those. We have to be at the theatre soon after eleven.'

'That will be thrilling!'

'No, it won't,' she snapped. 'It'll be dull. There'll be nobody there, because the Italians only arrived yesterday and they'll all be asleep. I only want to see how they've set the stage for *Bohème*.'

II

Two embarrassing incidents occurred before they were able to enter the theatre.

When they passed through the entrance into the lounge, their attention was arrested by a little group of workmen engaged in a furious altercation with a large, tearful Italian. (Though Baba was Spanish, most of her associates were Italian.)

''Oo are you to call us bastards, that's what we want to know?'

'Yes . . . what about yerself?'

'We don't let nobody call us bastards, see, not any Englishman, let alone a blinking Italian.'

To all of which their bewildered quarry could only repeat, with many fluttering gesticulations, 'Basta! Basta!'

Irela, realizing the situation, gave a shrill, delighted laugh. 'Too amusing,' she murmured to Pauline. She stepped forward.

'One moment!'

The little group was momentarily stilled. One of the workmen whispered, 'Why . . it's Madame Irela.'

They stood in respectful attitudes, though they shot occasional sullen glances at the Italian.

'Yes, it's Madame Irela,' she beamed. 'And you're all making a silly mistake. He isn't saying bastard. He's saying *basta*, which is the Italian for "enough." '

'Gor blimey.'

So the little battle was settled, much to Irela's liking. And she promised to send each of the workmen a signed photograph.

The next battle was not so easily won. For when the men had dispersed, lighting cigarettes and chuckling to themselves, Irela looked round her and frowned.

'Those pictures!' she cried. 'Madness, to stick them up like that, in those horrible patterns.'

Pauline looked at the objects she indicated. They were large square posters, in bright colours, indicating scenes from various operas.

'Come on. We'll move them.'

Pauline hesitated. 'Do you think,' she began, 'that we ought perhaps to ask if . . . ?'

'Ask who?' Irela, who was already beginning to shift one of the posters, stood erect. 'Whom should we ask? Haven't I got the lease of this theatre?' She regarded Pauline indignantly. 'I hope you don't mean that I should ask somebody's advice on a matter of *taste*?'

'Good heavens, no!'

'Then please come and help me move this one. They're terribly heavy.'

Pauline helped her. Irela groaned and panted, her pearls swung out and became entangled in the frames, the ospreys on her hat were powdered with plaster, her gloves were dirtied by the dust, but she was evidently enjoying herself. 'How like a child she is!' thought Pauline. 'Nobody could possibly believe that this is the great, awe-inspiring *prima donna*.'

Soon they had moved most of the pictures to one side of the wall. It never seemed to occur to Irela to call an attendant. She was just turning round to attack another group when a smart-looking young man stepped forward.

'Just a minute, please.'

'What is it?' she asked impatiently.

He smiled somewhat perkily. 'I think I should ask *you* that.'

'I am Madame Irela,' she panted. 'These posters . . .'

'I am Mr. Vernon's secretary,' said the young man calmly. 'I'm afraid I cannot authorize you to move them.'

'Really!' She rolled the 'r' with dragon-like ferocity. 'Really, I don't think you quite realize. . . .'

'I'm very sorry, Madame Irela,' he said, as calmly as ever. Then, as though to appease her, 'What was it you disliked about them?'

She was still panting. 'They're impossible in that position. They're hideous enough in themselves, but when you stick them out against the wall at right angles . . .'

'Some people might like them in that position.'

'Some people!' she shrilled. 'Are you talking to "some people"? Do you know who you *are* talking to?'

He was evidently beginning to realize, for his eyes shifted restlessly and his face grew a little pale.

'Why . . . of course. . . .'

'How dare you talk to me like that? Were you never taught manners at school? Do you know that you have one hand in your pocket?'

He took it out quickly. He gulped some inaudible reply.

'How old are you?' she demanded.

'Twenty-four, madame.'

'And you dare to come and dictate to me? Really. I think it's a little extraordinary! I do, indeed!'

He did not reply.

Irela gave him a final glare. 'Tell Mr. Vernon from me,' she said, 'that those posters are to be kept hung straight, as I have moved them. If they are placed in any other position, they will go altogether, and he'll have to buy new. And if he does buy new, they'll come out of *his* pocket. Good morning to you!'

She swept down the staircase. Pauline, glancing shyly back at the young man, saw that he was wiping his forehead with his handkerchief, and that he looked exceedingly distressed.

III

The day was yet young.

When Irela went down the stairs she expected to see a darkened auditorium, a stage set for the first act of *Bohème*, and various underlings who would do her bidding. True, there was no rehearsal of *Bohème* for two days, but she had a vague idea that, in view of the importance of the event, the stage *would* be set. After all, the scenery was here, the stage-hands were engaged, so why not?

What she was entirely unprepared to see was what she did see. Which was a stage empty of scenery, but occupied by various men and women who were singing to the accompaniment of a full orchestra.

She paused in the doorway. 'What on earth . . .' she exclaimed. Then she turned to Pauline, and spoke in an angry, excited voice:

'There's some trickery here. They're rehearsing the *Barbiere*. They never told me . . . it's disgraceful . . . with a full orchestra, too . . . you see? There's Sovino conducting . . . the little man with a face like a rat. There's trickery, I tell you, and I believe it's Kober who's responsible. I'm beginning to distrust that man. Where is he? Ah . . . here he comes.'

He came towards them through the darkened stalls. He bent down to kiss her hand, but she snatched it away.

'Who called this rehearsal?'

He shrugged his shoulders.

'It wasn't you?'

'Dear lady, I can't call rehearsals. I'm only a "rolling stone." You'd better ask Vernon. He's the manager of the Irela syndicate, isn't he?'

There was something almost insolent about his tone.

'Don't be a fool. What's the use of asking Vernon? He never has the least idea about anything. I think it's monstrous. We've only got a limited amount of money to spend on rehearsals, and here they are doing the *Barbiere*, which isn't being given for another six weeks.'

'Judging from the performance they're giving, they seem to want a rehearsal pretty badly.'

'That's got nothing to do with it. What about me? What about *Bohème*? I tell you it's monstrous.'

Again he shrugged his shoulders.

'Is that Baba, sitting on that box?'

'Yes.'

Irela put up her lorgnettes. She saw a completely round bundle of young Spanish womanhood. At the top of the bundle was a round white face, which appeared to have no nose . . . only two round black eyes and a round purple mouth.

'God! How old is she?'

'She admits to twenty-five.'

'What'll she be like in another ten years? Heavens! She's standing up. And it makes no difference at all! She's rounder than ever. My dear! What is to be done with her? She's far worse than Tetrazzini!

Really . . . she'll be a laughing-stock. We'll lose money on her. . . .'

But there was a strangely gratified expression on Irela's face which was difficult to associate with the thought of financial loss.

'Ah . . . she's going to sing.'

And then the gratified expression died away. For Baba's voice was good, far *too* good. Nobody but a fool would attempt to compare it with Irela's. It was the voice of a bird, whereas hers was the voice of a spirit. But it was the voice of a very agile little bird, clear, strong, and of immense compass. It was, moreover, a young voice . . . it burbled with *joie de vivre*.

Irela kept up a running commentary while Baba sang the somewhat disjointed phrases which the lazy Rossini prepared for Rosa.

'She sings her top notes too loud,' she said. 'They all do. All those people. She'll have no voice left at all in ten years.'

'She'll have corns on her vocal cords,' she continued. 'Heavens! I shouldn't wonder if she'd got them already! Listen to that top D. Why does she want to put in a top D? It isn't in the score.'

'It's very effective,' said Kober.

'Don't be a damned fool, Kober. Do you and she know better than Rossini? I never sang top D when I sang it, and I *could* have sung top F, as you know very well.'

'My dear . . . nobody could possibly compare her with you. . . .'

'I should hope *not*,' she snorted. 'And why has she left out the trill? Eh?' She leant forward like a hound on the scent. 'Why has she left out the trill? Hasn't she *got* a trill?' She spoke as though she were a doctor discovering the absence of some vital organ in the body of his patient.

'I really don't know.'

'You don't *know*? And you engage . . . or help to engage . . . a woman to sing the *Barbiere* who hasn't got a trill? What's she going to do in *Lucia*, I'd like to know? The "mad scene" will go to hell if she hasn't got a trill. And what about *Rigoletto*? Have you forgotten what *I* used to do at the end of the second act . . . starting the trill at the bottom of the staircase and keeping it up right along the gallery until I got into the wings? Really . . .' She made a gesture of impatience, but again there was a certain expression of gratification on her face at the thought of Baba's grave defect.

'*My* trill,' she observed, without a trace of self-consciousness, 'is unique. Everybody knows that. I'm not asking her to have a trill like mine. I've had mine photographed on the audometer, and it stretched across thirty feet of film and was absolutely even all the way across. Heavens, she's trying to do a trill now. . . . Oh, really . . . it sounds as if she were tight. . . . You *must* see the difference. . . . Listen, Pauline.'

And here, to Pauline's great dismay, Irela proceeded to trill, softly but quite clearly, so that it was heard throughout the theatre.

The inevitable happened. Sovino threw down his baton, and turned towards them, running his hands through his hair and shouting fierce words in Spanish. At the same moment Baba screamed, sat down heavily on her sugar-box, and also shouted fierce words in Spanish. The orchestra stopped, with an ugly, irregular jerk, like a bus whose brakes are jammed too quickly. Everybody began to jabber. Pauline heard Kober saying hurriedly to Irela, 'You see . . . they didn't know it was you. . . . It was just the fact that we were talking. . . .'

'Really . . . I've never heard such nonsense.'

'I'll explain.' Already he was hurrying down the gangway. Irela followed with Pauline. There was a moment's silence, and then Kober was speaking in fluent Spanish, with a great many references to Irela. 'Irela!' echoed Sovino, somewhat sulkily. 'Irela!' cried Baba, springing from her sugar-box. In a moment everybody was on the stage being presented.

'So sorry,' beamed Irela. 'Me permite –' Her Spanish was terrible, but they brightened when they heard it.

IV

There was an awkward pause . . . one of those pauses where life seems tense because of its very immobility – when a moment is crystallized into an eternity.

They faced each other . . . the tiny round woman with the smooth cheeks, and the proud old woman with the wrinkled neck. On Baba's finger was an immense yellow blister pearl which looked like a child's toy, on Irela's bosom glowed three magnificent ropes of pearls. Baba's coat was of cheap mink, Irela's of sumptuous sable. Behind Irela stood Pauline and a dozen obsequious small-part men, and stage hands. Behind Baba stood only . . . Kober. And yet Pauline was struck with a sudden chill . . . she had a feeling that she was standing at the foot of a throne that was trembling in the balance. It was as though Irela were rising proudly, in some ancient court, to receive the obeisance of a subject who was, in reality, a conqueror . . . a Roman empress receiving a deputation of barbarians. . . . Oh, enough of these metaphors. She felt them to be unprofitable. And she hoped that they were without foundation, for Baba said:

'I shy . . . very shy . . . to seeng before Irela.'

Irela laughed artificially. 'Isn't she sweet?' she said, turning to Pauline. 'When she has sung so beautifully?' She laughed again and said to Baba, 'We must be great friends . . . grande amigos . . . yes?'

'Sí . . . sí,' cried Baba, clapping her hands.

'And Signor Sovino too,' added Irela. 'You are to conduct for me in *Bohème*.'

Sovino assented, with so little display of enthusiasm that another awkward moment might have ensued had not Kober stepped forward and explained to Sovino that Irela had been a personal friend of Puccini. This information impressed Sovino greatly, with the result that he muttered a few phrases about honour and felicity, which gave Irela an opportunity to make her adieux with a certain grace.

When they left the theatre the rehearsal was again in full swing. Pauline had a curious sense that they had been dismissed, as though they were intruders.

V

Irela sat in the car, clutching the sable rug, staring straight in front of her.

'She's not a bad little woman,' she said.

'No. . . . I thought she was rather a dear.'

'All the same, I don't like the look of things.'

'Oh, you mustn't upset yourself . . . please . . . I'm sure . . .'

'It's that man Kober,' said Irela. 'I'm not sure whether he's to be trusted.'

'But he adores you!'

'Kober never adored anyone. He adored my voice, because he's an artist. . . . I'll grant him that . . . but now . . .' Her lips set in a grim line, and her voice rose. 'Oh, he's like all Russians . . . always with an eye on the main chance . . . ready to sacrifice anything for money.'

She laughed bitterly. Then she looked Pauline straight in the eyes, and in a voice that did not tremble, she said, 'He thinks I'm finished, Pauline. He thinks the end has come. You mark my words! He's like a rat deserting a sinking ship.' She smiled . . . not a pretty smile. 'He's making the biggest mistake of his life. For I'm not sinking. . . . No, Pauline . . . I'm not sinking yet!'

CHAPTER FOUR

I

DONALD GAGE was one of those extraordinarily agreeable young Americans who combine exceptional good looks with a gaiety of spirit which has in it more of the tradition of Merrie England than most Englishmen would care to admit. For nobody, of late, has been sufficiently optimistic to attribute any merriment to the England of to-day, and only a few persons have been honest enough to grant that if the tradition lingers anywhere, it is in America – yes, though the laughter may be accompanied by the tinkle of a cocktail shaker instead of by the stirring of the wassail bowl, though the songs may have a brooding negro timbre instead of an earthy, Saxon tang.

He was 'merry' . . . a beautiful word, delicate and vibrant . . . fresh as spring leaves. Merry even when there was no possible logical reason for merriment. Even on this exceptionally dreary morning, when we renew his acquaintance, some ten days after the episode of the camera, he was merry.

He was clothed in a vest and pants, and he looked exactly like those *Saturday Evening Post* advertisements for young gentlemen's underwear which cause such peculiar sensations to throb in the breasts of otherwise adamant American matrons. Cause them, indeed, to turn to the back pages with a girlish enthusiasm which cannot be entirely explained by their anxiety to discover how the serial ends. Cause them, sometimes, to sigh, and close their eyes, and think bitter thoughts about the town's Bad Rich Women, who go to Europe and swoon all along the Riviera in the arms of obliging *gigolos*. Cause them, ultimately, to open their eyes, gaze with distaste upon their large-paunched husbands, and bid them a snappy good night, prior to going up to their bedrooms to put an extra screw into their chin-straps, and an extra dab of cold cream round the corners of their eyes.

He stood looking out of his bedroom on the top floor of a lodging-house in Half Moon Street, and he thought, 'Gee, what a climate! Gee, what a city! Gee, what a nation!' He was quite justified in thinking these things. A peculiarly obscene fog was in the process of descending upon London. Already, although it was only ten o'clock, a twilight gloom was obscuring the street outside. The chimneys on the opposite houses were barely visible through the yellow haze – one could just see that they were belching melancholy fumes to the desolate air. The street below was quite invisible. One looked down, merely, into a cold, misty hell, through which the street lamps glimmered, like sickly primroses. The fog was creeping through his window, although it was tightly closed, making his eyes smart and his throat sore. Yet, in spite of this typical display of the English climate, he was merry. Actually, he laughed! He said to himself:

'Well – it doesn't make any difference whether my camera's bust or not – not to-day, it doesn't!' After which crude statement, he lapsed into thought.

That old Irela! That blasted old madame! Gee! He should have done something about that. The dirty old . . . He pursed his lips, and scratched his naked knee. Mustn't use bad language about a lady. But say, did you ever hear anything like it? He'd a good mind to bring an action against her.

Then he laughed again – quite naturally and heartily. Bring an action? What chance would he stand? With thirty pounds in the world? No, twenty-five, because the rent was due to-day. No, fifteen, because he owed for that overcoat. No, ten, because . . . no, five, because, no . . . hell . . no, nothing at all, because he had to pay for the old camera, and that would be . . . gee, why *didn't* he sue the old . . .? And then he really did say the bad word, because he was not used to doing his financial accounts so thoroughly, and he had not realized quite the fix he was in.

There was only one reason, he admitted to himself, why he had not taken a firmer stand, made some sort of claim. And that was because of the girl. He saw her now, in his mind's eye, by that old woman's side, pale, all in black, with parted lips and eyes like stars. *She* certainly had nothing to do with it. *She* was sorry for him. He was sorry for her, too, having to stay with an old woman like that. Or perhaps she wasn't staying with her? He wondered, for the hundredth time, if she would answer the letter he had posted last night. . . .

Then the telephone rang.

II

In a room not a mile away . . . a room with exquisite Italian chairs and pale grey *toile de Jouy* curtains . . . Pauline stood with Donald's letter in her hand. She, being female, and a secretary, was fully dressed in spite of the early hour. For Irela had demanded her assistance before breakfast was over . . . demanded it so fully and tyrannically that Pauline, for the first time since her arrival, had been a little put out . . . had realized, with a sudden shock, that Irela was being just a tiny bit tiresome. As soon as the thought entered her head, she quelled it as ungrateful, mean, and generally despicable. Still, it *had* entered her head. And with it had come more general reflections.

'Everything's so old around me . . . everything and everybody . . . so terribly old.'

She thought how strangely her life had suddenly changed . . . how she was becoming obsessed, for example, by the fear of draughts . . . how she peered round anxiously to see that the windows were shut, that the screen was in the right position, that the rug was properly adjusted . . . she who, in all her girlhood, had never cared how fiercely or unwontedly the cold winds of the North blew about her.

And the conversation! Always its theme was cast in the past tense, an Edwardian echo tinkled eternally through its rhythm . . . and often the funeral bell tolled through its periods. 'Ah! Will there ever be another woman like Gladys? And do you remember the parties Alfred de Rothschild used to give at Hackett? And Plançon! When will the world ever give us another Plançon? They talk about Chaliapin, but . . .' Thus it went, to the accompaniment of withered hands that fluttered aimlessly, fluttered beseechingly, like tired birds which had flown to a land too cold and too swift.

Pauline stood at her window, looking down the fog-choked street, so sour, so desolate, so damned, and she said to herself, 'I want youth. . . . I want it terribly, just for a little while.'

And she had it in her hand.

She read Donald Gage's letter, for the tenth time.

Dear Miss Joycey,

I hope you will excuse me for writing to you. I am the photographer who unfortunately offended Madame Irela at the station the other day. Perhaps I ought to write to her, but I write to you because you seemed a little more sympathetic.

I am very bad at expressing myself, and really all I wanted to say was that I was sorry if I caused you any annoyance. It was all rather a shock to me. Still, I would love to get a photograph of Madame Irela . . . and I would guarantee it to be O.K.

It is hopeless when I try to write. I can't say what

I want. But I do want you to know that I would be very happy to hear that you *were not offended. It would give me great pleasure if I might be privileged to see you again, one of these days. I learnt that you are a Canadian, and in England for the first time, and I guess we might have something in common.*

This letter is dull, fresh, and generally awful. I talk much better! My phone number is Gerrard 9216 *if you would ever honor me by calling up.*

Sincerely,

Donald Gage.

'Dull, fresh, and generally awful!' There was a boyish tang about those adjectives which Pauline found irresistible. She lifted the phone.

III

Donald went to the telephone a little dubiously. He did not for a moment associate the ring with Pauline. It was far too soon. Therefore, his face registered only pained suspicion. He distrusted English telephones. Sometimes they electrocuted you, sometimes they split your ear-drums, usually they just infuriated you with a vague, distant clamour, through which there drifted the voices of incredibly genteel maidens, who were always lamenting the fact that you had been 'tr-r-roubled.' But to-day, strangely enough, the voice was clear and sweet.

'Is that Mr. Gage?'

'Sure. Who is it?'

'My name is Pauline Joycey. I was with Madame Irela at the station the other day. You . . . you wrote to me.'

'Oh!' His lips parted in a slow, delighted grin. He rubbed his naked toes together. 'Oh!' he repeated, 'is that so?' Then, very anxiously and suddenly, 'Are you there?'

'Why yes, I'm here!'

He breathed a sigh of relief and sat down on the edge of the bed. 'You see, these damned English telephones – pardon me – I mean you never know when they're going to cut you off. So, you got my letter!' He closed his eyes, and swayed slightly on the bed.

'Yes. Thank you very much.' The voice trembled slightly.

Astounding and fantastic manifestation of Nature! Baffling, bewildering example of the power of chemical attraction! Over a sensitized wire two human animals were making sounds at each other, and in the tangled echo of those sounds, love was being born! Perhaps, indeed, it had been born already – at first sight – for there is no other sight in love – perhaps it needed merely some faint connection, even a telephonic connection, to awaken it again. The fact remains that these two persons, Pauline, standing trembling in Irela's music-room, with her eye on the door, and Donald, sitting shivering in his cold bedroom, with his eyes half closed, were indulging in a love chant as authentic as the cooing of any doves on any summer's eve.

'Say,' he said, after a pause that was deliciously expectant to them both, 'I've been wanting to get into touch with you for a long time.'

'Have you?'

'Why, yes. I wanted to . . .' he paused. What *did* he want to do? He could hardly say that he wanted to kiss her. So he said, a little lamely, 'I wanted to apologize.'

'Oh!' came the voice from the other end. 'But that's what *I* wanted to do. About your camera. You see, I'm Madame Irela's secretary.'

'I see.' He sounded a little disappointed. 'So you really called up on *her* account?'

'Well, not exactly for her. She doesn't know I'm ringing up. I . . . I just wanted to say I was sorry, and I'm sure she would be too, if she realized . . .'

'Gee!' He was all smiles again. 'If that isn't the nicest thing. Say, have you got a luncheon appointment any place?'

'I'm afraid . . .'

'Well, to-morrow then?'

'I'm afraid . . .'

'Say, don't go on saying you're afraid. There's nothing to be afraid of.' A pause. Then, in a very low voice, 'I'd like to see you terribly.'

Pauline clutched the telephone to her breast. She felt shot through with pangs of exquisite pain. She was absurd, crazy, but his voice . . . oh, his voice . . . what was she to do?

What she did was to go quite mad. She said, 'I'll lunch with you to-morrow.'

Donald, after a whoop of delight, fixed the Ritz at one. As he rang off he reflected that, if he pawned his watch, he would be able to give her anything she chose from the menu. If he did not pawn his watch they would have to lunch *table d'hôte*. He decided to pawn his watch.

IV

'Mad!' repeated Pauline to herself, as she stood there, tapping the telephone receiver with the tips of her fingers. 'Quite mad!' While she had been talking to Donald the room had seemed filled with his presence. But now – oh, now it was very decidedly filled with Irela. It was not only that photographs of her, in every conceivable attitude, covered the walls . . . photographs taken (or perhaps we should say 'carved') by Mr. Loope. It was rather that her presence seemed to permeate the very air, intensely alive and violently possessive.

What was she to do? She was going to lunch with him to-morrow. That was a fact that she accepted as quite inevitable. She did not know why it was a fact, but it was. However, it was also a fact that if Irela knew she was even going to see him at all – this monster who had so grossly offended her – Irela would die of anger and mortification.

She began to talk to herself – a habit which grows upon all 'companions,' sooner or later, whether old or young. She said:

'Could I say I've been asked to lunch by a relation? But what relation? Irela knows I haven't any relations. She'd start climbing up family trees, and asking terrible questions.

'Could I just say – quite casually – that I'd rather like to lunch by myself for a change?' But the idea of saying anything 'quite casually' to Irela was so fantastic that she dismissed it instantly. If you said anything 'quite casually' to her, she asked you to 'speak up,' which meant that you assumed a nervous shout, and there was something extremely unconvincing in the phrase, 'I thought I should like to lunch by myself for a change,' if you had to bellow it at the top of your voice. Irela would say, 'Why did you think so?' To which there would be no reply.

She was absolutely without plans. For the moment she gave it up. She went downstairs. The day proceeded like a melancholy dream.

Then, in the middle of her agitation, when things seemed at their very darkest, God came to her aid – as He will, at rare moments, in life as well as in fiction. For Irela, at tea that afternoon, looked up and said to her:

'I've got to lunch with the Windermeres tomorrow. You'll have to look after yourself.'

It was as though a flock of sunbeams had lighted upon Pauline's face. But she kept her head. She said, 'They're charming, aren't they?'

'The most fearful bores in London,' snapped Irela. 'I've a good mind not to go.'

The sunbeams fled. Pauline said nothing. 'However,' added Irela, 'she always takes a box for the whole season, so I suppose I must. *Why* she takes a box, Lord only knows. She can't tell "God Save the King" from "Rule Britannia," and snores like an ox all through *Bohème*. Still . . . one's got to be polite.'

Pauline was trembling violently. 'I think it's wonderful,' she said, 'the way you put yourself out.'

Irela looked slightly appeased. 'Oh – it's business,' she answered airily. 'I've been at this game too long not to know that an opera season isn't all art. Not by a long chalk.' She looked at Pauline. 'What'll you do to-morrow?'

Pauline, with extraordinary daring, said, 'I might lunch out.' She added quickly, 'It would give the cook a rest.'

Irela nodded approvingly. Pauline was really very sensible. It was an excellent thing that the cook should be given a rest, always provided that she used the rest to good effect, in order that she might arise, refreshed, to work new enchantments with her art.

'Quite right.' She beamed at Pauline. 'If I were you I'd go to Soho. They say there are some charming places there.'

'Yes,' said Pauline. 'Perhaps I might.' She would not have been at all surprised to hear, at that moment, the crowing of a cock.

V

Then, the next day, the blow fell. In after years Pauline called it – since it was the first of many – the First Putting Off.

For as they started out for their morning drive at eleven o'clock Irela said:

'I'm not lunching with the Windermeres after all. So you can have lunch with me at home.'

'What?'

'Don't shout at me like that, darling. And please don't tug at the rug. Look! You've pulled it right off my knees. What is the matter?'

'Nothing . . . oh, nothing.' Pauline felt as though she were in an express train that was driving her to destruction. 'I only wondered why you had changed your mind.'

'I can't be bored, that's all. Life is too short. Why should I sit with an old woman and try to amuse her?'

Pauline tried to smile. The same question might have sprung to her own lips.

Irela regarded her hungrily. 'I must have youth round me,' she said, 'to give me vitality. To take me out of myself. All these old people sap me . . . sap me! When I'm with young people, why . . . it's like food and drink to me.'

Pauline could have sworn that Irela licked her lips, as though she were actually drinking young blood. It was a horrible thought, and it soon vanished, for her whole mind was bent on trying to discover some way to let Donald know in time. Had it been anyone else with whom she was lunching she might have risked Irela's wrath and told her. In the circumstances she dared say nothing. She could only hope that they would get home in time for her to telephone to him before he had gone out.

But everything seemed to conspire against her. Irela was in one of her most difficult moods. She had brought out some letters to read in the car, and she tore them open so carelessly that the envelopes fell all over the floor. It was impossible to pick them up without disturbing the rug, and each time that Pauline bent forward Irela scolded her for being so clumsy. She handed her two or three letters at a time, issuing such vague and hurried instructions that Pauline, even if her mind had not been wandering, would have found it impossible to keep pace with her.

'What was the reply you wished to send to this cable?' she asked. 'Was it . . . "touched by your thought." '

'No, darling, it was *not*,' replied Irela, sharply. 'It was . . . "touched thought." '

'Oh!' Pauline still looked a little doubtful.

'Whatever do you say "Oh!" like that for? Isn't "touched thought" enough? Why should I throw money into the arms of the post office by putting an extra "by your"?' Then she added, with more energy than grammar, 'Who else's thought could I be touched by?'

'I only thought it sounded a little brusque.'

Irela moved impatiently up and down on her seat. 'Really, darling, I must ask you to allow me to be a judge of that. I've been sending "touched thought" cablegrams for . . .' She was going to say 'forty years,' and then changed it to 'long before you were born. Nobody has complained yet.'

Pauline hastily apologized. 'I expect I shall soon start to know these things without asking.'

Irela pulled her up at once. 'And Pauline,' she continued, 'I *must* ask you not to use the word "start" like that. I may not know much about the English language, but at least I know that you use the word "start" only to express motion. When you're running, for instance. You must not say "I shall soon 'start' to know these things." You must say "I shall soon *begin* to know these things." Don't think me tiresome, dear, but I do hate slovenliness in anything.' And she drew herself up proudly and tugged her chinchilla collar into position.

Pauline felt completely crushed.

Irela continued to reprove her. 'I'm glad you asked me about "touched thought," ' she added. 'Because really, darling, we must keep down expenses. I'm not a rich woman. . . .'

She paused and looked at Pauline as though she feared to be contradicted. But Pauline said nothing.

'And I have to pay attention to detail. I cannot go spending pounds every day on sending long and extravagantly worded cablegrams to every Tom, Dick, and Harry who chooses to waste his money on silly messages. But that's only one thing. Another thing is champagne.'

'Champagne?'

'Yes. We seem to be drinking a terrible lot since you came.'

Pauline looked at her indignantly. 'But I never touch any.'

'No, darling,' continued Irela, 'which I always think is a pity, because it doesn't look very sociable not to take just a little sip. And please don't jump down my throat like that. What I meant was that Scott always pours it out too early at dinner.'

Pauline by now was beginning to rise in revolt. 'I think you might have told me this before.'

'I can't see to everything,' bewailed Irela, changing her tone. 'I thought that when you came. . . . Of course, if it's too much trouble. . . .'

'It is not a question of trouble. It is merely that I cannot be expected to guess things.' Pauline marvelled at her own boldness. 'When do you wish Scott to pour out the champagne?'

'With the fish, darling,' said Irela eagerly. 'And not till everybody *has* the fish. Several times lately he began to pour it out before the soup was off the table. It looks so terrible – like a profiteer. Besides, it's so ridiculously extravagant. If a man begins to drink champagne with his soup he'll get through the best part of a bottle before dinner is over.' She grew quite agitated about this question. 'And while you are speaking to Scott, please tell him not to open a new bottle just at the end of dinner when everybody's glass is full already. It's disgusting. Sometimes when I see him doing it I feel like calling out . . . but what can one do? One's powerless. . . .'

On this pathetic note she allowed the conversation to lapse. And later, when she cautiously slid her hand across the rug, and linked her fingers in Pauline's, Pauline pressed them impulsively, for she had a nature that quickly forgave. Yet she felt depressed and exhausted when the drive was over.

VI

Pauline had a miserable lunch. They did not return to Charles Street till after one. She could not get Donald on the telephone. There was no reply to his number. And there was no means by which she could send him a note. As she sat at the table with Irela she seemed to see Donald sitting in the hall of the Ritz, kicking his heels . . . growing more and more impatient . . . eventually giving her up as a bad job. It was only half-way through lunch that she remembered she might have telephoned to the Ritz itself and left a message. She cursed herself for her inefficiency. It was too late now.

Meanwhile she trembled at the thought that he might telephone to the house. Irela always liked to go to the telephone herself. But he did not telephone. As the hours drew on she began to fear the worst. Was he so offended that he would never approach her again? Had there been some dreadful accident? She telephoned him from her room. He was still out.

It was not till nearly six o'clock, after endless assurances from various telephone operators that there was no reply, that she at last found him.

'Say . . . what happened?' His voice was the voice of a rather sulky little boy.

'Oh . . . I can't tell you how sorry I am . . . how terribly sorry . . . you see . . .' And then she explained.

'But why should you have told her? You needn't have said it was me.'

'She would have wanted to know. . . . Oh, you don't understand.'

'No, I don't.'

For a terrible moment she feared that he was going to ring off. Then, it was as though a smile crept into his voice. He said softly, 'Yes, I do.'

'Oh, I do hope so, I do indeed. I wouldn't have had this happen for the world.' Then, nervously, she laughed. 'Isn't all this funny?'

'What?'

'You and I. We've only seen each other once, and yet . . .'

'Yes?' He spoke very eagerly. 'Now, come on, you can't hang up on that.'

'I was only going to say I feel as if I'd known you for years.'

'Same here. All the same, I'm beginning to wonder if I ever *am* going to see you again.'

'Oh, dear. It is difficult.'

'Nothing's difficult, if you want it badly enough.'

'It's easy for you to say that. You're free.'

'And you're a prisoner . . . a captive princess. . . .'

'No . . . no . . . you mustn't say that.' She clutched the telephone nervously. 'It's only that . . . oh, I can't explain. But may I ask you a favour?'

'Sure.'

'Don't make any luncheon engagements for the next three days. I'm sure I shall have one day free. But I shan't know till the last minute. So may I telephone you again?'

She could telephone him all day and all night, he said. And they continued to talk, over that enchanted wire, for a long while, until they were talking themselves into a dangerous state of emotion.

VII

That night, Irela was stricken with remorse. She admitted to herself that she had spoken very harshly to Pauline in the car. She was particularly charming at dinner, and after she had said good night, she ascended to her room, and made a plan.

It was a financial plan. Lately, as she had come to rely more and more upon Pauline's companionship and assistance, she had found herself facing the fact that Pauline was penniless, and that something would have to be done about it, something in the nature of a definite allowance.

Sweet Pauline! So efficient and so charmingly pliable . . . though she *had* spoken a little rudely in the car. Still . . . she was really an ideal companion. She would not only make her a generous allowance, but she would give her a present . . . a piece of jewellery . . . yes, she would indeed!

She dismissed Tremlowe, hurried to the safe, took out her third best jewel-box, and brought it to the dressing-table. The piece which she chose was a small but exquisite ruby suspended on a platinum chain. It had once formed part of a large circlet of rubies which had been reset for her by Cartier and had been eliminated because it was too small to be fitted into the general design. The platinum chain was already in her possession, and the connection of the two had been a happy inspiration. The ruby would normally have been used as a wedding present, but why, she thought, in the warmth of her heart, why should it not go to Pauline?

Nevertheless, she was not *quite* certain whether she ought to part with it. After all, it was a very beautiful ruby, small, but – as she held it up to the light – quite flawless. And she had read, the other day, that rubies were going up in value. Not, of course, that this fact had the least influence with her. It was not the value of the ruby which deterred her from giving it to Pauline – the sweet girl could have her pearls, her everything, if she ever asked for them – it was rather the *suitability*. Pauline was a simple girl, fresh, supremely innocent. Was not a ruby . . . a little . . .? Irela, after another glance at it (it really was quite flawless) decided that, yes, a ruby was, a little . . .

Then a happy laugh escaped her. Why, the very thing! Pearls! Only this moment she had been thinking of pearls, and here, before her, was this charming old necklace. True, they were only blister pearls, of considerable irregularity and somewhat haphazard colouring, but they *were* pearls. How charming they would look round Pauline's neck! Their very imperfection could only serve to enhance her beauty . . . their somewhat unusual colour (many of them were a rather dirty grey) would only be an extra comment on her own brilliant complexion. Irela felt quite touched by the delicacy of this sentiment, and was almost glad that the pearls were of an inferior quality, so superior had been the quality of her own emotion.

Still . . . and here again she paused. Pearls were pearls. Even if they were blister pearls, and discoloured too, they were pearls, and as such they had a certain value. Not, she hastily assured herself, that she grudged giving Pauline anything. . . it was again, what was the word she had found before . . . ah, yes, it was a question of suitability. . . . Were such large pearls quite right for Pauline? Were they not a little . . .? Irela, having examined them a little more closely under the light, and having observed several specimens which were neither blistered nor discoloured, decided that they were . . . a little . . .

It was really very difficult. Here she was, with her jewels spread before her, longing to give any of them to Pauline, all of them, if she wished, and quite unable to decide which was the most suitable. She ran her fingers over the glittering collection . . . shivered deliciously at the milky sheen of ropes of pearls . . . spread a tray of diamonds before her, gloating over their icy brilliance . . . gazed deep and amorously into the deep sea depths of great emeralds. The stories they could tell, those jewels, in scarlet and white and green! The tales of love and despair they could fling, contemptuously, from their hard and exquisite faces!

Irela drew her hand across her eyes. What *should* she give Pauline? She was determined to give her something – she was in a sacrificial mood, and when a woman wants to sacrifice anything, whether it be her virtue or her property, it is always kindest to allow her to do it. And she was quite set upon doing it. The point was – what should it be? Then, quickly she recollected the very thing – yes, this time it *was* the very thing! A beautiful little coral necklace which had belonged to her mother.

Irela's eyes became quite dim as she drew this object from a lower tray in her second best jewel-box – not, it must be admitted, because of the intrinsic beauty of the necklace, which was of a sickly shade of rose, held with a somewhat tarnished silver clasp. No – her mind was now soaring in higher regions than those of mere beauty. For to give *this* to Pauline implied a sacrifice not of money but of sentiment. Her mother had worn this necklace! Her mother! (The fact that Irela had detested the sight of her mother, and was heartily thankful when she died, need not detract from the value of her emotion. She had forgotten all these things.) Besides, the necklace was eminently suitable for Pauline. Young – simple – demure. She put it aside. How delighted Pauline would be! She made a little mental note that Pauline, in view of this generosity, would be only too delighted to pay for the slight repair which appeared to be needed to the clasp.

The problem of the jewels settled so happily, she came to the large and much more important question of the allowance. Obviously Pauline ought to have a little independent income. Irela could not bear the thought that she was staying with her merely because she had nowhere else to go, or because she would not get such a large salary elsewhere. (Irela had quite genuinely forgotten that at the moment she was getting no salary at all.) Any thought that Pauline was being *forced* to stay with her would entirely spoil the charming nature of their relationship . . . would make Irela positively unhappy. No. She must certainly have an independent income . . . say of £500 a year.

Five hundred pounds a year? Irela pursed her lips. That meant a capital of £10,000, and where on earth could she raise so much money? She had barely £8,000 lying idle in the bank, and at any moment she might be forced to dip into it . . . there was, for instance, that new bracelet which she had seen at Cartier's which would be at least £1200, though she could probably get it for £1000 if she paid cash. That only showed the folly of throwing away large sums. If she gave Pauline all this money, she would have to buy the bracelet on credit, which would be equivalent to putting a clear £200 into Cartier's pocket. Much better give the £200 to Pauline, she thought, with righteous indignation. Much better.

Supposing that she put aside £5000? That would really be ample. It would bring in £250 a year . . .

no, £300 a year if it were happily invested, and Pauline could not possibly want more than that. After all, she really did not see what she *could* spend it on. She had her home here, and all her meals, and Irela was only too delighted that she should use the car whenever she wanted it, provided, of course, that she was always going in the same direction as herself. And if by any chance she wanted to go out at a different time (girls will be girls, she thought) she could always take a bus. Irela had heard that the new buses were really most comfortable, far *too* comfortable, some people said – pampering the working classes. But nothing, after all, could be too comfortable for Pauline, and Irela was only too delighted that she should ride in the most luxurious buses she could find – as long as she did not ride very far and was always ready to come home and keep her company after a penny fare.

But again, doubts assailed her; £5000 was really a lot of money. It was a tremendous amount of money. When one considered taxation – what with the supertax and everything – it was really equivalent to £8000. And here she was, calmly proposing to throw £8000 into the lap of a girl who had only been in the house a few weeks. 'No, no,' she told herself. 'I must keep *some* sort of curb on my generosity.' Whereupon she suddenly thought, why use any capital at all – why not make her an allowance of £300 a year, and draw up some sort of legal arrangement that it was to last her as long as she lived?

She thought for a little while about this, and the more she thought of it the less she liked it. Legal arrangements were so very expensive. Such a plan might involve an expenditure of at least £20. It would be much better to arrange it privately, and to *give* to Pauline the £20 which would otherwise have gone to the lawyers. 'There I run on again,' she reflected, with a happy smile, 'giving her things!' This was obviously the best plan – to give her £300 a year, and to make some private arrangement (she was pleasantly vague as to what this arrangement should be) – that the sum should be paid for the rest of Pauline's life.

However, as she thought more about it, this sum of £300 a year did seem – well, she put it to herself – a little ostentatious. A *little* overdoing it. After all, she had not really taken into account half that Pauline was getting from her. One mustn't be sentimental about these things, she thought. She reflected that if Pauline were an ordinary secretary, she would have to pay at least £100 a year for her room at this house – well, of course, she would never get such a lovely room for twice the price, still, one needn't be particular – and then all her food – of course, she would never get such food either – but that would cost her quite another £100 a year. Then there were presents all the time – for instance, this week there was the coral necklace, which was worth quite £5, and next week there might be something else also worth £5, which meant that in presents alone she was getting £250 a year. That, with what she would have to pay for her room and her food was an extra £450 a year, which was really equivalent to £1000 a year, if you considered that Irela was paying the taxation, and *that* was equivalent to a capital of £20,000, which brought her back to where she was before.

She sighed. She became quite hot with these calculations. She really *must* try to stop this flood of generosity which, willy nilly, seemed to pour from her. But it seemed almost impossible to do so, unless she gave Pauline nothing at all and turned her out in the street. She wished that she had someone here to help her. Then, on reflection, she was rather glad that she had not, because she had often found that other people's opinions on what was just and reasonable did not always tally with her own.

It was evident that she must begin with the assumption that Pauline, by being housed and fed and covered with expensive presents (and here she jangled the coral necklace between her fingers) was receiving, at the outset, £450 a year. No, better make it round figures and say £500 a year. Many people, less generous than Irela, would have considered this ample, excessive indeed, even if they gave her nothing else at all. But Irela did not quite see how she could give her *nothing* else. After all, she must have spare change – for instance, in theatres, when she gave the programme girl half a crown. She did not see why that should not come out of Pauline's pocket. After all, why should Irela *always* be giving? However, the laws of logic ordained that if half-crowns were to come out of Pauline's pockets for Irela's tips, somebody must first put half-crowns into them. And she realized, with another sigh, that the half-crowns would have to come from her. It was really endless, this giving – giving.

She began to feel quite alarmed, like a spendthrift suddenly stricken by pangs of conscience. One could not possibly be too careful in these days. There had been a fall of an eighth in War Loan only to-day, which meant that she had lost 100,000 half-crowns while they were having luncheon. The fact that this had been offset by a rise of ten points in American Can, in which she held five thousand shares, thereby gaining fifty thousand dollars during the interval of the same meal, did not encourage her. One must not overlook the principles of sound investment. Besides, there would probably be a relapse on Wall Street to-morrow. It was ridiculous of her to think of calmly throwing twenty thousand pounds into Pauline's lap at a moment like this – for, if the reader has followed these tedious calculations, he will recollect that £20,000 was the sum which Irela, with an ingenuity worthy of a better cause, had decided should represent her proposed gift of £300 a year.

The more she thought of this £300 a year, the more it seemed to swell. The more monstrous and engulfing proportions did it assume. She was not thinking of herself – oh, far from it – she was thinking of its effect upon Pauline. For, she reminded herself, she was to a certain extent responsible for

Pauline's moral character. She was a very young girl, quite unused to handling large sums of money, and to throw her suddenly upon London with unlimited funds was asking too much of human nature. Besides – for the fiftieth time Irela asked herself – how could she possibly *spend* £300 a year? Even her flowers were provided for her. (Which reminded her that she *must* tell her not to mix the orchids when she was doing the flowers – such bad taste – all anybody wanted was a blaze of yellow orchids at one end of the room and a blaze of white at the other.) Even her flowers, Irela repeated to herself, were provided for her. No, £200 a year was ample.

At this figure, Irela stuck. She felt that it was just right. Of course, it was generous – lavish, some people would say, in view of the tremendous advantages that Pauline was receiving – but still, she felt that she could afford to be lavish. No, not 'afford' – that was quite the wrong word, when she thought of the income-tax man. But though she could not afford it, she would do it.

She made a pencilled note, before retiring to bed, that Pauline must pay for her own laundry.

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CHAPTER FIVE

I

If you are, for the first time in your life, both in love and in the Ritz, you will presumably be deeply moved. Many odd emotions will surge within you.

Fear was the dominating emotion in Pauline's breast as she walked into the lounge three days later. Irela had suddenly decided to stay in bed. Donald, true to his word, had been waiting at the end of the telephone. And here they were! But still Pauline could not feel quite secure. Would Irela suddenly leap upon her from behind one of those enormous palms? Was her hat – a pretty affair of crimson straw – was her hat on straight? Would everybody know that she had never been to the Ritz before? Above all, would Donald think her an awful bore?

She need not have asked this last question if she had only looked into his eyes, as he sprang to greet her from the depths of a brocaded chair. But she dared not look into his eyes. She was afraid of betraying herself. Besides, for the moment, she was more overwhelmed by the people around her than by Donald himself. Meals with Irela were alarming enough, with their confusing dishes, their array of wines, and obscure talk, which she could never properly follow. Irela, however, was at least a relation. Irela knew that she must not expect either brilliance or sophistication from Pauline. Whereas, these people . . .

They drank their cocktails somewhat formally. She sat very erect, and tried to smoke a cigarette as though she did not loathe it, and darted alarmed and somewhat piteous glances at Violet, Duchess of Rutland, who was evidently enjoying herself, and seemed, indeed, quite at home. Donald thought, 'Hell – she's sore about something. Hell – she's prettier than ever. Hell – she's a peach.'

Both were feeling terribly shy. The conversation was far too stilted to be recorded. Let us therefore follow them in to lunch.

Pauline, as she rose to her feet, was mainly determined to show that she was entirely at ease. And therefore she walked into the restaurant proudly. She cast haughty stares at the food on peoples' plates. She glared icily at the fat necks of the women who floated by her. She curved her nostrils in tremendous disdain at white-moustached gentlemen. She darted fierce glances at waiters hurrying towards her, that she might quell them if they attempted to bar her way. She was like a young Boadicea advancing relentlessly, in a fiery chariot, through ranks of enemies.

That, at least, was the impression she tried to create. Actually she looked like a very shy, pretty girl, making her timid way to the least important corner of the room.

Perhaps Donald guessed something of what she was feeling. For he smiled at her as they sat down (a smile that caused an Argentine *cocotte*, immediately opposite, to swallow an enormous anchovy, in great agony and excitement) and he said, 'Say, just because you're in the Ritz, you needn't get Ritzy with me.'

'With you?' She smiled back (a smile that caused the same *cocotte* to drag out her vanity case and almost break her lipstick in a frenzied desire to make herself attractive). 'I couldn't be Ritzy with you.'

'Couldn't you?'

He leant forward, and put his hand across the table. He upset a vase of carnations.

'Oh! oh!' Pauline whispered to herself. 'This is what happens when one misbehaves. We shall be thrown out of the Ritz! Everybody will stare at us! Perhaps they will complain . . . think we are drunk.'

But no. Nothing terrible happened. A waiter darted forward, smiling so charmingly that one would think that the only thing that could possibly have made his happiness complete was that Donald should upset the carnations. A flick of a napkin, a little bow, and the disaster was effaced.

They both looked at one another. And they both looked so grave that Pauline, by the grace of God, suddenly laughed. So did Donald. And she said:

'You know, I've never been in the Ritz before.'

'Neither have I.'

'What?' It was incredible. 'One would think you lived here.'

'That's just what I was thinking about you. Didn't you hear me tell you not to be Ritzy?'

'Yes, but . . .'

'Well, I tell you, I'm scared stiff.'

At which moment a waiter appeared with an enormous menu. Extremely haughtily, they both ordered lunch. They did not at all care what they ate, and they both ordered far too much. When the waiter had gone, they breathed a sigh of relief. Then they laughed again.

'It's silly, isn't it?' said Donald.

'What?'

'My being here with you. I'd just as soon be any place . . . with you.'

She gave him a nervous smile. Then she looked down. It was all heavenly . . . but, oh dear, she did hope he was not going to say anything very embarrassing, at least . . . not just yet.

'Any place,' he continued. 'From the moment I first saw you . . .'

Then the waiter arrived with a waggon of *hors d'œuvres*. Few things in life are more calculated to cool the passions, to steady the intellect, and to soothe the nerves than the necessity of choosing, from an abundantly loaded vehicle, a suitable assortment of *hors d'œuvres*. By the time that they had both chosen (and again, they chose far too much, forcing the waiter to exercise all his dexterity in laying succulent slabs of pimentos on top of piles of sweet corn, without splashing) they both felt more at ease. After they had eaten a little, and marvelled at the fate which had thrown them together, and sighed, and generally broken the ice, she said:

'You know, I oughtn't really to be here at all. Madame Irela . . .'

'Say, is she a holy terror?'

'Really!' Pauline was quite indignant. 'She's the greatest, most wonderful woman in the world. Also, she's my aunt. It's just . . .'

'Just what?'

Pauline tried to explain. She told him Irela's difficulties, emphasized the fact that Irela was not so young as she had been. He listened respectfully.

'I understand,' he said. He smiled another of his melting smiles at her. 'Gee – I like you for that. I like loyalty. That's the first quality in a woman, I guess.'

'It isn't loyalty. It's . . .'

He interrupted her. 'Well, whatever it is, it's swell. But what we've got to do is to figure out some way that I can come into her life again without having my eyes blacked. By which I mean . . .' and here he twinkled at her, 'come into *your* life.'

'Oh dear!' said Pauline, 'I know.' She was beginning to blush again. She crumbled a roll, desperately.

'Well, it may interest you to know that I've thought of a way.'

'Have you?'

'This is what we'll do, see? I've borrowed another camera from a chap who's gone back to America on vacation. He won't be needing it again for another six weeks. The first picture I'm going to take is one of Irela, in the street, and she won't know I've taken it, see. . . .'

'Oh, but you *mustn't*.' She stared at him, wide-eyed with alarm.

'Say – you don't understand the half of it. You know as well as I do why she doesn't like snapshots. . . .'

'Well . . .'

He put his hand on hers. Feeling deliciously abandoned she allowed it to stay there. 'It's because she looks like hell in them, isn't it?'

'Oh!'

'Well it is. But this one I shall take of her will make her look like heaven. Gee – Greta Garbo'll throw a fit if she sees it. Jeritza'll go into a convent. Lady Diana Cooper will take the first boat out of the country. . . .'

'But how are you going to take it without her seeing?'

'There's a mail-box outside your house.'

'How did you know that?'

He grinned. 'I've been up and down that sidewalk plenty in the past few days!'

'Oh, really!' thought Pauline. 'Honestly!' she whispered to herself.

'I'm going to get behind that mail-box with my camera and take her when she comes out of the house. Now, when *does* she come out?'

'She goes for a drive every day at eleven.

'Do you go with her?'

'Of course.'

He grinned again. 'If I'd known *that*!'

Pauline tried, in great agitation, to prevent the conversation from becoming too personal.

'But could you take it without her seeing?'

'Of course. The point is, what am I going to *take*? You see, this has got to be a knock-out picture. It's got to have action in it. Now, has she got a dog?'

'No.' Irela did not like dogs.

'No pets at all? Not a monkey, or anything like that?'

No, there were no pets. Except a rather grizzled tom-cat which lived a peculiar life in the basement, and caused Irela to shriek with horror if it ever showed its whiskers upstairs.

'Say – that's tough. Well, we'll just have to make her laugh, that's all.'

'Make Irela laugh?' She trembled at the thought.

'Well, she *does* laugh, doesn't she?'

'Oh, yes. But . . . not always at the sort of things you'd expect.'

Pauline tried as best she could to explain Irela's sense of humour. Donald seemed determined that she should laugh. There was no market, he said, for just an ordinary snapshot of a *prima donna* stepping into a car. But whenever Pauline repeated stories at which Irela had laughed, he merely looked glum.

'Say, I don't think that's very funny,' he would say.

'Neither do I.'

Then he clapped his hands together. 'I heard a six weeks. The first picture I'm going to take is one of Irela, in the street, and she won't know I've taken it, see. . . .'

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'Say, I don't think that's very funny,' he would say.

'Neither do I.'

Then he clapped his hands together. 'I heard a swell story yesterday. Listen. Two bulldogs were walking down the promenade at Brighton. See?'

She nodded. Oh, they were very earnest, very tense, very young!

'Then,' continued Donald, 'up comes a Pekinese. One of the bulldogs sees the Pekinese and starts to run for its life. When they get out of sight of the Pekinese the other bulldog says, "Say, why d'you run away from that Pekinese? That Pekinese can't do us any harm?" And the bulldog looks at his friend and he says, "*That Pekinese has got the coldest nose on the south coast!*" '

They both laughed so heartily at the story – which one admits is a story that should be told by word of mouth rather than in the pages of a book – that the Argentine *cocotte* rose from her table in disgust and swept from the room. But they did not notice her. They were too busily engaged in formulating their plan.

It was therefore decided that on the following day, before Irela took her morning drive, Donald should station himself outside the house, concealed behind the mail-box. Just before they emerged from the house, Pauline was to tell Irela the funny story. By skilful manœuvres she was to see that Irela got into the right position, still laughing. The photograph was then to be taken, to be developed by Donald himself, and touched up into a thing of ravishing beauty. It was then to be sent to the press, where Irela would see it, be enchanted by it, send for Donald. . . .

'And,' said Donald, lifting his glass, 'that's when everybody lives happily ever afterwards.'

Pauline felt that the plan was the maddest in which she had ever participated. But she did not care. By the time that they were sipping their coffee, she was deeply in love.

II

She spent a restless night. She was haunted by the thought of the story, whether Irela would laugh at it, whether Irela would notice Donald behind the mail-box, whether she herself would remember the story. 'Two bulldogs,' she kept on saying to herself, as she lay staring at the ceiling. 'One Pekinese. Coldest nose. How awful if I say one bulldog and two Pekinese! How awful if I forget the bit about the nose! And then, to *time* it properly . . .' Oh, it was all very distracting.

The next day, by the grace of God, was bright and sunny. Pauline was in a fever of agitation, which she could hardly conceal from Irela. She kept looking out of the window, to see if there were any clouds. There was one, of a peculiarly malicious design, which appeared to be bent on doing its worst, stalking the sun as a cat stalks a mouse, never quite reaching it, but stretching a long white paw dangerously near.

'You seem very restless, darling.'

She turned to Irela. 'Do I? It's such a lovely day – perhaps that's why.'

'Well, we'll be going out in a minute.'

'Oh, of course.' Pauline was elaborately casual. 'I'll go and get ready.'

She went upstairs. Bulldogs – Pekinese – it was too agitating. Would it not be better just to laugh gaily herself – at nothing – in the hope that Irela might join in? But no – Irela would think she had gone mad. Why *should* Irela laugh, anyway? But Donald had determined on a laughing picture. She would do her utmost to help him get it.

Heavens! It was nearly eleven. She pulled on her hat, dabbed some powder on her nose, and ran downstairs.

The front door was open. John was helping Irela on with her coat. Now . . . now was the vital moment. She stepped forward, and somehow, by a violent effort of the lungs, achieved a fairly convincing laugh. 'Oh dear!' she cried . . . 'I've just remembered such a funny story. . . .'

'Where's my damned bag, Tremlowe?'

This was a terrifying, utterly unsuspected development. However, Tremlowe produced the bag, and Irela, drawing her furs round her, said, 'What did you say?'

'A funny story,' bleated Pauline.

'Yes? Yes? Tell me . . . tell me.' She spoke as though she were inquiring about relatives in a railway accident.

'Two bulldogs,' began Pauline.

'I know it,' snapped Irela. 'It's the Scotch bulldog and the Irish bulldog, isn't it?' She turned to go.

'Oh, *no*, it isn't!' She almost wailed the words.

'Well?' Irela turned again. Then she spoke to Tremlowe. 'Why isn't the car here? Where's Dingley? What's happened?'

'It's still only two minutes to eleven,' ventured Tremlowe.

'He ought to be here. Shut the door.' She glared at Pauline. 'Go on with your funny story.'

'Two bulldogs,' she repeated.

'Yes, yes. You said that before.'

'Were walking down the promenade at Brighton.'

'Why?'

'Why?' echoed Pauline. She was almost in despair. 'Why?'

'Yes, why?' Irela tapped her foot impatiently. 'Oh, never mind why, then. Darling, you *must* learn to tell stories quickly.'

In a sort of delirium, she babbled the story. It seemed that it would never end. Bulldogs, Pekinese, the promenade, the sea, floated before her in a gruesome procession. At the end of every sentence Irela said, 'Yes, yes?' in the most disturbing manner. At last she finished.

She looked at Irela, and stretched her lips into a fixed and tremulous smile. Then Irela said, without a sign of amusement:

'Pekinese *ought* to have cold noses. If their noses aren't cold, it's a sign that they're not well. Didn't you know that?'

'No. I didn't.'

'Everybody ought to know it. Didn't you ever keep a dog?'

'No.'

'Well, it's the whole point about a dog.'

The door swung open. The car was there. Irela fumbled once more with her furs, turned back to say something to Tremlowe, and stepped into the street. Failure, utter failure. Pauline followed her, in the depths of despair. She did not dare to look over to see whether Donald was there. She had failed him. The most he could possibly do was to take a horrible snapshot of Irela with the grimmest expression on her face. He would never forgive her. Everything was at an end.

Then suddenly, without warning, the miracle happened. Irela saw the joke. And Irela laughed. Again and again. She stood on the doorstep, and clutched Pauline's arm saying, 'Oh, I *see* . . . the coldest nose,' and laughed again, 'too amusing . . . the big bulldog . . . oh dear . . .' and laughed again. 'It's really *too* amusing . . . the coldest nose. . . . I *must* tell that to Kober. . . .' For at least thirty seconds she stood there. She might indeed have known that she was posing for her photograph, for she turned this way and that in an ecstasy of amusement.

III

The photograph was published the next day. It was splashed right across the middle page of the *Daily Post*. It showed Irela as a slim, graceful figure, laughing gaily. Moreover, there was absolutely no tell-tale 'mist' round her chin nor her figure, which proved that Donald's artifice was superior even to that of Mr. Loope. The caption underneath was:

IRELA IN HAPPY MOOD

What was it that so greatly amused Madame Irela, the world's greatest prima donna, as she went for her drive yesterday morning? A prize of ten guineas will be awarded to the reader who sends the best suggestion.

Irela did not see the photograph till she came downstairs. Then Pauline spread it before her. She screamed with delight.

'My dear, it's *perfect*! The best I've ever had! Right across the most important page, too! And the *Post* has over two million readers. But who did it? Where did they take it? I didn't see anybody . . . did you?'

'No,' said Pauline, which was perfectly true.

'And you're in it too, darling! It's *very* good of you! (The picture only showed Pauline as a vague blur in the background.) 'Just the sort of picture of you I've always wanted. It's really too extraordinary. I can't imagine how they took it. And they're offering a prize to the reader who sends the best suggestion . . . *what* fun! I think I shall send in a suggestion myself. Or shall I tell them what the joke really was? That would be marvellous publicity. . . . Or would all the stuffy people say it was too rude?'

Then the door opened and John appeared.

'A young gentleman has called from the *Daily Post*, m'lady.'

Irela turned to Pauline. It was fortunate that the room was rather dark, for Pauline's face was bright red.

'Here they are already,' she said. 'They really are *most* enterprising. Show him in, John.'

Donald walked through the door. Irela advanced to meet him, stopped, stiffened.

'You!'

'Madame Irela,' he said hurriedly, 'I oughtn't to have done it. But I just had to prove I could take a proper picture, and . . .'

'You mean . . . *you* took this?' She pointed to the *Post*.

'Why, sure.' Then he looked her straight in the eye, and grinned. 'Say, I'd awfully like to know what the joke was. I might win that ten guineas.'

Irela capitulated. Instantly, completely. She trotted round the room being forgiving, arch, imperious, and babyish by turns. She made 'funny' faces and did her imitation of a cock crowing. It was all a little exhausting, but it served its purpose. For, as Donald was going, Irela linked one arm in his and the other in Pauline's, and said:

'We'll make him our Court photographer, shall we?'

'By special appointment to the Queen of Song,' said Donald happily.

Irela gave an enchanted laugh. 'You must come and see us again,' she cried. 'Why don't you and Pauline go out together one day? She must get tired of going about with an old thing like me!'

'Darling, how can you?' exclaimed Pauline.

'I can't imagine anybody getting tired of *you*!' said Donald. There was a bright glint in his eye, and his voice trembled. 'But I'd be honoured if Miss . . .'

'Joycey.'

'If Miss Joycey would come and . . . well, I'm terribly fond of dancing.'

'So am I,' said Pauline.

'Then dance, darlings, dance! Any time. Just ring up and she'd love to come!'

And Irela, with a final laugh, danced away down the dim corridor.

'Done it!' whispered Donald.

'Done it!' whispered Pauline.

As she showed him out, it seemed to Pauline that a golden haze lit the street, and that the branches of the trees in Berkeley Square were faintly tipped with green.

CHAPTER SIX

I

Pauline woke up one morning, a few days later, to the sound of the telephone ringing by her bedside. It was Kober.

'I should like to see you as soon as possible.'

'About Madame Irela?'

'Of course.'

'Well . . . I'll ask her. . . .'

'Please do nothing of the sort. I want to see you alone.'

'Oh!' Pauline reflected for a moment. She did not wish to go behind Irela's back. At the same time, it seemed to her very desirable that she should have a talk with Kober, if only to warn him of Irela's growing obsession. In the last day or two she had been worse than ever. 'Kober is intriguing . . . he's trying to stab me in the back . . . you'll see . . .' Irela had cried. Something had to be done about it. So she said:

'She is lunching at Richmond to-day, and won't be back till six. If you like to come to tea. . . .'

'I'll be with you at four o'clock.' He rang off.

Pauline looked grave as she dressed. It was not her normal expression, nowadays, for if it had not been for Kober her life would have been a full and happy one.

She was seeing Donald more than she had dared to hope. When Irela was lunching out, or when she had important people to dinner with whom Pauline was not supposed to 'fit,' or in the magic hours when she was resting, Pauline would call him up, breathlessly, on the telephone, and together they would set out on brief but exquisite adventures.

These were crocus days. On cold dull afternoons, when a thousand flowery candles glowed in the grass, she walked with him over the deserted pathways of Regent's Park. And when they were tired, they boarded the bus that goes to Bond Street, and strolled down that magic thoroughfare to see a certain flower shop that stands near the corner of Bruton Street.

They came to believe that this flower shop was their own, their garden, guarded by the misty glass, in whose scented spaces they drifted together. Theirs was the tasselled mimosa, so perversely powdered with gold dust, and theirs the molten lilac, whose calm white plumes glowed in the artificial light. All the roses of ivory and red were theirs, and all the stiff hyacinths. 'How can hyacinths stand so straight?' said Donald one day. 'Wouldn't you think they'd stagger about . . . wouldn't you think they'd be drunk with their own scent?'

And as the days went by the first tulips from the south were given to them, too, the tulips of pink and mauve in whose pale cups an indescribable perfume lingered. And the irises, the proud flags of Nature's legions, whose purple petals were stained with the blood of unearthly battles. For them the pansies glowed, the forget-me-nots winked their baby eyes, the violets whispered together, and the fingers of the honeysuckle beckoned them to far, faint lands whose valleys were always starred with flowers.

There was something enchanting, to both of them, in the thought of these exquisite things in a London street. For the shop window was a frame, and a frame, though we do not always realize it, is an important part of every picture. There are some gardens in Venice that are lovelier than any other gardens, because round their borders the grey water glistens. There are other gardens in cities, where the roses seem to shine with a light that is not of this world, because they shine through the mire and the soot. And this shop, which was only a little hole in a commercial thoroughfare, seemed by its very position to emphasize the frail beauty that it was privileged to shelter.

Apart from Donald, Pauline had few worries. Irela was temperamental, of course, but there seemed to be no serious problems. She was singing divinely – rehearsals were going well – Baba was being docile and keeping as much as possible out of her way. It was only Kober who loomed, like a dark cloud, on the horizon. Was that cloud created only by Irela's imagination? And if so could Pauline dissipate it? Or was there indeed something sinister and strange that she did not understand?

She was soon to know.

II

It was four o'clock and Pauline was waiting for Kober.

It had been a brilliant day. Hard and vivid, with a yellow sky. It was not a hesitant, trembling day of spring's beginning, but a sparkling, aggressive day of winter's end. A wind had arisen at noon, tearing the smoke from the chimneys, sweeping through the black, bare branches of the trees with a high, cold song. And the wind blew into the quiet, warm hall of Charles Street when Kober arrived, as though it shared with him some conspiracy unknown to the rest of the world.

Pauline received him in the music-room. He did not smile at her, did not even shake her hand. He went straight to the fire and stared into it. Mechanically she offered him the tea which John brought. He waved it aside, and followed John with impatient, brooding eyes till he had shut the door and they were alone.

'What has Irela been saying about me?'

'Well . . .' Pauline hesitated. What had she *not* been saying?

'That I'm a liar and a cheat? That I'm intriguing against her? I see by your face that she's said all that! Has she said I'm a murderer yet, eh? Has she?'

Pauline turned away. 'Don't be ridiculous,' she murmured.

'Is it so ridiculous?' He spoke tensely. Then suddenly he laughed.

'Don't let us get melodramatic. Tell me the worst quite calmly, and I'll try to bear it. I'll even have a cup of tea, if it would help you.'

She told him as much as she dared as he stood there. His figure cast a shadow over her, and the rattling of the teacup in his trembling hand made a perpetual strange accompaniment to her words.

She spoke slowly. 'She has an idea that you are not . . . loyal to her. She believes . . . I don't know why . . . that you are inclined to support Baba Letoile against her.' She looked up at him.

'Go on.'

'She seems to imagine that you are spreading rumours that her day is finished. . . . Of course, I know it's all absurd.' She hesitated. 'In fact, it's only when I try to put it into words that I see how absurd it all is. Still, it's just as well that you should know.'

'Quite.'

'Well . . .' Pauline laughed nervously. 'There it is.'

Kober was not looking at her. He was warming his hands at the fire. Pauline had a momentary impression of Mephistopheles in the smoke and flame of his first appearance in *Faust*. Then he turned towards her and said abruptly:

'Do you want to know why Irela's afraid of me?'

Her voice was quite calm as she answered, 'Naturally.'

'It's because she's afraid of herself.'

'I don't understand.'

'Oh yes, you do.'

The firelight danced through the room like a gay, heartless spirit. The logs hissed and hummed. Kober went on:

'It's because she knows *I* know.'

'That you know . . . what?'

'That she's finished.'

Pauline rose to her feet. He put out his hand and motioned her back. Instinctively she obeyed.

'Listen, my pretty child.' He seemed to be staring right through her. 'I'm not a fool. Especially about the things that I love. That's been my tragedy in some ways. . . . I've *seen* the things and the people I loved more clearly, because I loved them, whereas most people who love a thing . . . or a person . . . are mercifully presented by Providence with a pair of rose-tinted glasses. Providence never acted like that towards me.'

'I have loved Irela's voice all my life. It has been my passion. And because it has been my passion, I know it . . . *know* every tint and shadow, every inflexion, every overtone . . . and her voice is full of overtones. I know her voice far better than she knows it herself. I could tell you . . . in all seriousness . . . what she had eaten for dinner by hearing her sing a single scale. I could tell you if she were going to have a cold long before she guessed it herself. I could tell you . . . oh . . . I needn't go on. . . . I only ask you to believe that there is nothing about that voice . . . that lovely sound that has been my life's inspiration . . . that I do not know. I wish to God I knew my own soul as well.'

He folded his arms. 'Oh – he is right . . . he is telling the truth,' thought Pauline, and she trembled for fear of what he was going to say next. But outwardly she was calm. She merely lowered her head in assent.

'And now the voice is going . . . going. . . .' His hand was stretched in front of him, shaking violently. Pauline looked from it to his face. She expected to see distress, pain . . . she was horrified to see a smile, as though he were gloating over some secret.

He went on: 'Do you realize why the orchestra plays *fortissimo* during the whole of the love scene in the first act of *Bohème*, whereas Puccini only marked *forte* in the score? Because she can no longer take the high notes without using every ounce of her strength! Do you realize why she has cut out nearly a quarter of an hour from the second act of *Faust*? Because she can't last the course! Have you ever listened to her singing the very first phrase in *Faust* . . . that marvellous phrase (though it *is* sugar) where Marguerite appears, and sings: "Non, monsieur, je ne suis demoiselle ni belle, et je n'ai pas besoin qu'on me donne la main?" People used to come over from Paris in the height of the season merely to hear her sing that phrase. It was the loveliest thing in the world. It is still lovely . . . still, in some ways, incomparable, but it's no longer the same. She has to take four breaths where formerly she only took two. And the end of the phrase, with the low notes, is no longer like a cello . . . it's harsh . . . strained . . . she gets away with it . . . of course . . . with nearly everybody. But not with me.'

'Is that why? Can that be the reason?' She spoke more to herself than to him.

'Of course it's the reason.' There seemed to be a sort of exultation in his voice. 'Consider what she does. She works over every phrase like a nigger. She sits here in this room, with her pencil, and her spectacles . . . you've seen her . . . you know . . . and she says she's studying. My God . . . she *is* studying . . . to see how she can pull through . . . how she can fake! She takes volumes of notes . . . you've seen that too . . . and when she's made up her mind, she trots off to the theatre, and has a heart-to-heart talk with Sovino. That's why these orchestral rehearsals are taking so long. That's why she gave him a diamond pin. And that's why she hates me!'

Pauline looked at him defiantly. 'I don't believe it,' she said. 'She's bigger than that . . . she wouldn't be so petty. . . .'

'Wouldn't she?' He spoke with intense bitterness. 'Wouldn't *you*? When you had ruled undisputed for forty years, when you realized that your kingdom was in danger, and that only one man was in the secret . . . wouldn't you hate that one man? If you stood on the stage, still able to work the spell . . . not as you used to work it, but with a tremendous effort and by endless tricks and evasions . . . and you looked out into the dark stalls and saw one man, sitting at the back, who knew exactly what you were doing, and how you were doing it? Wouldn't you hate that one man? Wouldn't you hate me?'

'You sound as if you were glad that her voice is . . . is not what it was.'

'Glad? Why not?'

Pauline did not answer him.

'You have a strange sense of silence.' He stared into the fire. 'Glad?' he repeated. 'No, perhaps not that. I may be a bounder and a consumptive and an outcast Bolshevik, but at least I'm an artist. One could hardly be all those things without being an artist. At the same time . . .' and here he paused . . . 'I'm fascinated . . . fascinated.'

'That's a horrible word to use about such a thing.'

'I get the same pleasure from following the gradual decay of Irela's voice as a surgeon must get from watching the gradual growth of an interesting disease, or a neurologist tracing the slow atrophy of a fine brain. It's actually a scientific pleasure. Every time I hear her I can see a little bit more that's gone – I can see another spot of tarnish on the gold.' He smiled. 'Oh, yes, it is fascinating.'

'How can you . . . how can you?'

'*You* can't understand. But I've heard Irela when her voice was the voice of God – and of woman too. I've heard when she sang a high C arrogantly, *disdainfully*! Can you imagine that? It was so easy to her, so natural, so pure and unforced that she had only to open her mouth, and the miracle occurred. I've heard her trill, like a nightingale, on B flat, and waltz round the stage as she sang. I've heard – oh, never mind. . . . But now . . .'

'I still think her voice the loveliest in the world.'

'Don't be evasive.' He suddenly spoke very quietly, as though reproving a stupid child. 'You're too intelligent to be so depressingly girlish. Do you remember the end of the first act of *Bohème*?'

'Yes.'

'Do you remember the high C at the end?'

'I'll never forget it.'

'No. Because it happens to be an A flat.'

'What do you mean?'

'Merely that she always has it transposed two tones.'

'It's not true!'

'Isn't it? Ask her! No. I shouldn't do that. She'd probably have one of the grosser forms of apoplexy. Ask Piccolo. He has to sing with her. And unless he can sing at least one high C a week he feels like a cow that hasn't been milked.'

'I'd rather hear Irela's A flat than anybody else's C sharp.'

'Divinely equivocal creature.' He purred round her, then paused again in the middle of the room. Once more the marble hand was poised. . . .

'Fascinating!' He seemed to be muttering to himself. 'Don't you see? To watch the difficulties she has with her three registers! If she weren't such a wonderful fighter it wouldn't be such fun. But she is. And the cleverest of them all.'

Pauline was about to remonstrate but he checked her. . . . 'Oh, it's brilliantly done. I don't deny that three-quarters of the great British public – the public who really like contraltos and caramels – don't notice. They hear the Irela quality, they see the Irela profile, and they're poignantly conscious that their posteriors are reposing upon seats for which they have paid the Irela price. That's quite enough for them. But for *me*! Oh – you don't know the thrill I get when I hear just that little tiny break – the infinitesimal pause for breath – when I catch a clipped syllable before a high note – when I hear her singing an E flat *forte* instead of *pianissimo*, just because she knows that when she's changing that register she may crack. Even if I were deaf I could tell that all wasn't well – by the lines of her throat, the movements of her mouth – the swelling of her breast . . . God!' He was almost screaming now. 'There's nothing like decay. Especially decay of something that you've loved!'

Pauline stared at him, horrified. She saw him silhouetted there, against the window, with its vista of muddled, violet roofs. She saw the proud, bird-like profile, the palsied hand, all lit by the theatrical glow of a wayward sunset, and she shuddered. Nor was she comforted when gradually the hand dropped to his side, the face turned to her, melted, smiled, and the lips said:

'Does my sadism amuse you ?'

She shook her head. Speech had left her.

'Doesn't it? It amuses me.'

'I think you're horrible.'

'Still the loyal little ally?'

She stood up, and she spoke as quietly and as sensibly as she could. 'I can't see the reason,' she said, 'for this melodrama. You are employed by Irela. You say you are an artist. I should have thought that those two reasons alone would have been enough to cause you to be loyal to her. . . . I can't see why . . .'

'Why?' And now he came towards her, and his words were hissed rather than spoken. 'Because she's treated me as dirt all my life! Because she has insulted me all her life! I used to accompany her . . . I've written some of her best songs . . . she's sung them and refused to have my name on the programme! She's used me always and kicked me always! She's laughed in my face . . . pointed her fingers at my ugly nose . . . That's funny, isn't it? . . . Held up my arm on the concert platform so that everybody could see my shaking hand . . . and when we were alone she's called me a fool and a clown and a . . .'

'Stop! stop!'

Instantly he checked himself. His face set. He held himself erect. Even the palsied hand was momentarily stilled.

'I beg your pardon.' The words seemed to come from an immense distance. 'You see, I loved Irela. Not as a woman . . . just . . . a Voice . . .'

She walked away from him. She felt she could bear no more. His words followed her.

'Quite hopelessly. Always the clown. Always kicked. And now, I'm released from that. I can only hate.'

She stared out on to the darkening street.

'And it seems,' he added, 'that my turn has come . . . at last.'

Still she stared. The street lamps were blurred with a rain that had just begun. The wind had died down, and the smoke rose from the chimneys like waving, beseeching arms. When she turned round again he had gone.

CHAPTER SEVEN

I

For Pauline, Kober's outburst was the first strand of a network of fears which spread through her daily life, softly, almost imperceptibly. Fear is a strange affliction . . . the only true mental cancer. It is at the root of every complex, and like cancer it is all the more deadly because its cause is so often hidden.

After all, she asked herself over and over again through the crowded days, what had she to fear? Why did she watch Irela so intently, seeking, against her will, some evidence of the decay which Kober had forecast? Why did she tiptoe up the stairs, when she was practising, and listen outside the door of the music-room, trying to catch in the timbre of that hitherto flawless voice some tell-tale echo, to find on its silver surface some spot of tarnish?

Why did she realize . . . with a clarity that terrified her, the age, or rather the uniform 'elderliness,' of Irela's entourage? It was as though she had been at a party where the blinds were drawn, and the revelry ran high, where the laughter was gay and the spirits youthful . . . and then, suddenly, someone had drawn up the blinds, so that the dawn flooded in. And she saw that the faces around her were wrinkled and haggard, that the laughter came from old cracked throats, that it had all been a masque, a cheating masque, played against Time.

She was the only one in Charles Street who had not long ago said farewell to youth. For the men and women who came and went through those doors had all been bent and twisted by time. Their backs might be straight, their waists corseted, their faces bright with to-day's paint, but their minds were already dead, shut up in tombs that were proudly guarded by Edwardian gravestones. In this new, clear light of her understanding there seemed something a little horrible about their sprightliness, and one day, when Irela was giving a party, Pauline had a *crise de nerfs* in which she visualized these smart, frock-coated old men and these slim, painted old women as a flock of bats . . . black bats flitting through a cemetery. She put her hand instinctively to her hair, and stifled a scream. . . .

It was a perpetual marvel to her that Irela managed to keep up her brilliant spirits. Her energy never flagged. Her voice never dimmed. The only way in which she might be said to betray her age was in her obsession about Kober. Pauline, now, was able to understand this obsession. She no longer dismissed it as an incomprehensible freak of an otherwise sane woman. At the same time, there was still something very like madness in the schemes which Irela was evolving in order to thwart him.

'He's got Baba in his pocket . . . he's got Sovino in his pocket . . . they're *all* in his pocket,' she cried one morning, as they went to the theatre for rehearsal. 'Why can't somebody do something?'

'Couldn't you pay him off and get rid of him?'

'He'd bring a libel action. Oh – he's the cleverest of them all! And the wickedest! Did you see him strolling about the other day with his hands in his pockets when Sovino was coaching the Italians in "God Save the King!" Why, even the charwomen who were sweeping the steps stood up, and when they saw that Sovino was going to go on playing it for some time, they went upstairs and got on with some other work until it was finished. But Kober . . . oh no! He just kept his hands in his pockets. . . .'

She brooded over this for some time. Then she said, 'Why can't we get the ex-soldiers to tar and feather him?'

Pauline sighed. There was something so very vague in some of Irela's phrases. She frequently, in her conversation, invoked the aid of 'the ex-soldiers' as though they were a small and compact body of men, living in a specified area, capable of being summoned at a moment's notice to avenge the wrongs of the world. She said, 'Let us get hold of the ex-soldiers' in the same sort of way that she would have said, 'Let us telephone for a fire-engine.' This habit arose from the curiously literal quality of her mind . . . a quality which caused her to speak bitterly of 'the income-tax man' . . . a phrase which, for her, covered the whole enormous organization of Britain's machinery of taxation. She saw 'the income-tax man' as a single, hostile individual, bent upon her destruction. And she saw Kober as the head of all the forces of evil, invested him with unearthly powers of darkness.

Fear . . . fear . . . it grew on Pauline day by day. And there was indeed reason to believe that some grave clash was coming. No longer was Kober allowed in Charles Street. It was even becoming difficult for him to remain in the theatre while Irela was there. Yet, he was artistic director, he was responsible for endless details in every opera, her own not excepted. By subterfuge and tact, Pauline and the management, who fully understood the situation, were able, on most occasions, to keep them apart. But it was very evident that a storm was brewing.

II

Had it not been for Donald. . . .

Yet, he had not spoken. He had never told her that he loved her. He had never tried to kiss her . . . never even held her hand. It is true that there had been little opportunity for any of these overtures. All the same, fears now assailed her from this direction also. Was he only playing with her? Did he mean all the charming things which he said, or was he speaking with his lips alone? If only she might know that . . . if only they might have just one evening undisturbed . . . one evening in which she must not always hurry back, because Irela wanted her.

Their chance came a few days later. Irela said:

'I'm tired. I shall dine in my room to-night. Why don't you go out with your young man? Go and dine, and be thoroughly vulgar and go to a talkie.' Talkies, to Irela, were still the monopoly of the lower classes.

Pauline, with a singing heart, ran upstairs and telephoned to him. Yes, he was free. And he thought it would be grand to go to a talkie. They would dine somewhere cheap. And would she please be very careful when she crossed the road? And would she please wrap up well because it was a cold night?

As Pauline went out Irela called her back. 'Be as late as you like, darling,' she said.

'Oh, thank you . . . thank you. . . .'

'But if you do go to a talkie, you might just ring up afterwards . . . if you're going on anywhere . . . in case. . . .'

'In case?' Pauline whispered the words after her. Then she nodded, and kissed her and went downstairs. 'In case.' 'In case' what? Was every pleasure in her life to be qualified by that fatal clause? There was something foreboding about it, and fear again assailed her. But when she stepped into the street, and the keen wind struck her cheeks, she held her head high, and shook away the fears. It was a bright-eyed, radiant creature who greeted Donald.

III

As they sat at dinner, Pauline learnt, for the first time, something of Donald's life. It enthralled her.

He had been forced to leave Yale, at the height of a brilliant career, owing to the bankruptcy of his father. He had arrived in New York with the traditional ten dollars in his pocket, and a camera on his back, had refused an easy position with an uncle in Wall Street, and had got a job on that most brilliant of all the newspapers that are no more, the *World*. Here he had more than lived up to the first Mr. Pulitzer's Great Thought, which used to be printed at the head of the editorial page. One already forgets exactly what the Great Thought was, but it was in the best democratic traditions, and breathed resolution and 'forwardness' in every line. So did Donald, with such ardour that he was sacked from the *World* as a disruptive force. Then he went to the New York *Clarion*, which fully appreciated his dynamic qualities, but considered that he would be better employed in Europe, with other anarchists. They paid his fare to London, and would have liked to wash their hands of him. But they couldn't. His photographs were far too good.

That photograph, for example, of the Famous Backs of Europe, which they had splashed across the front page of their Sunday Supplement. He had taken it at Juan-les-Pins, during the height of the season. It showed the back view of five almost naked persons, two male and three female, sunning themselves on the beach, and the caption underneath was '*Puzzle – find the Bishop!*' The text then explained that among the persons represented above was a certain great American leader, one of the richest men in the New World, who had only to lift his finger to make millions of his followers write substantial cheques for him, in token of their spiritual devotion. Could you spot the Bishop? Were you cute enough to detect, in any of the behinds that were here spread before you, a certain spiritual effulgence? Or were you, perhaps, of a high enough social standing to know these things by sheer habit? Anyway, if you could, you would get a prize of ten dollars.

It was unfortunate – and sadly illustrative of the lack of true religious feeling in America – that the behind which was marked with a cross by nearly all the entrants for the competition happened to belong to Miss Elsa Maxwell.

Famous Backs had made his name in the photographic world. He had little difficulty in keeping it. An impish humour in him gave a quality to his photographs which few of his rivals seemed able to emulate. He always seemed to be able to crowd in a few more umbrellas than anyone else when he was immortalizing some seaside mayor in the process of opening a new ornamental garden on the English Riviera. He brought a Dostoevski touch to his pictures of murderesses, and as for his picture of the Prince of Wales. . . .

It was, indeed, with Royalty that he had been most successful.

He had photographed queens from the front (laughing heartily), from the behind (laying foundation stones), from sideways (receiving bouquets from perspiring Girl Guides), and from above (descending into coal mines). By a few deft touches to the negative he had accentuated the primeval savagery of the Royal hats, causing these hats, indeed, to cease to be hats at all, but to appear as dark, mysterious symbols of an ancient world. For the domestic magazines he had swollen out their bosoms ('they say she's such a womanly woman'), and caused an extra sparkle to radiate from their necklaces ('they say the Crown jewels are worth five million dollars'). No queen in any American paper looked so truly, so emphatically a queen as when she was photographed by Mr. Donald Gage.

With the kings he had a little more difficulty. The most fervent monarchist could not deny that, with few exceptions, the kings of Europe appeared to have shrunk in the wash. Perhaps this was an example of Nature's instinct for self-protection, Nature, the realist, having observed that the modern king's chief use is to serve as a target for bombs, may have arranged a process of selection by which the target was made as small as possible. Whatever the reason, the kings were very difficult to catch, especially if there were any large dogs about. They had a habit of being swallowed up behind batches of Boy Scouts, or completely obscured by bouquets, or blotted out by the baby at christenings, or lost in the fold of a flag. The best place to take them, Donald discovered, was on the top of a flight of steps. By placing the camera near the ground, and tilting it sharply upwards, a clever distortion was obtained which made them look almost life-size. It was fatal to take them when they were making speeches from balconies, because then only the tips of their moustaches appeared, and the American people at once leapt to the conclusion that they were hiding from bombs, which was bad for European prestige.

All these things, in his quaint American dialect he explained to Pauline, as they sat together, and she was enraptured.

'It makes my life seem so dull . . .' she complained.

'What – with Irela to look after?'

Again, at the mention of that name, fear seized her and she trembled.

IV

But in the movie house, Fear fled before Romance. True, the romance which they felt fluttering around them was more in their own hearts than in their surroundings. The woman next to them was eating caramels with a fierce avidity that caused her to whistle, internally, each time that she stripped a sweet of its paper covering. She had evidently eaten a great many caramels in a great many houses of entertainment, for she had reduced to a fine art the process by which the caramel is extracted from its box, denuded, poised, and popped into the mouth. Never once did she remove her eyes from the screen even when she was making the transition from the first layer to the second. She stared always in front of her, wide-eyed, open-mouthed, and at regular intervals her hand was raised, hovered for a second, and then swooped down, hawk-like, upon its prey. It always hit a caramel square in the middle, and jerked it instantly to the open mouth, which proceeded slowly, rhythmically, to assimilate it, in time to the music.

Donald and Pauline watched her, fascinated. They were sitting very close together now. They were both wondering what the other was thinking, wondering fiercely . . . but meanwhile they were content to watch the caramel woman . . . and they watched her till the end of the box. When the last caramel was eaten they smiled at each other, and then Donald put his hand over hers. Which made them both dizzy with excitement.

This tardy, hesitant love-making may sound extremely Victorian . . . no, that word must be crossed out, for it has been uttered by so many lazy mouths that it is meaningless. Yet it has the right aura about it. And the Victorian aura was very delicately fitted to such love as theirs. Donald and Pauline were not the type who snatch each other in taxis . . . their lips had not searched feverishly for other lips through the smoke and din of cocktail parties. Not that there is anything wrong in that . . . except that searching lips are apt to be seared and numb, and an over-indulgence in taxi-snatching dulls the senses. In fact, many quite young people in this year of grace appear to need the aphrodisiac of an automobile before they are capable of any spiritual or physical declarations. . . . All of which is an inexcusable diversion. . . .

The picture began. It was a very silly picture, though all sorts of Karl Schencks and Otto Spitzenhermers appeared to have busied themselves with its production, the one attending to the screen story, the other to the musical effects, while countless Oscars, Fritzes, Hugos and Wolffs had attended to the other embellishments, such as the choreography, the luminography, and presumably, the osteopathy, evolving between them a simple tale of Scottish mother love, guaranteed accurate in every detail, down to the last hair in the sporran of the Italian *gigolo's* kilt. After the audience had been stunned by the customary bombardment of Teutonic names, after a flimsy lion had roared and a very Hollywood sun had risen and set, among a great many more names, and the final ray had flickered out to the final tremulous screech from the tinned organ, the play actually began.

An abnormally white-haired mother was saying good-bye to a peculiarly black-haired son. She was saying good-bye in the middle of a storm, in the middle of a hut, in the middle of dinner, and also, apparently, in the middle of the story, for it was all quite incomprehensible. But whether one understood it or not, it was extremely moving, and exceptionally moral. Nobody could possibly take exception to the sentiments which boomed from those grey celluloid lips:

'A mother's love, my son, will follow you.'

'Mother o' mine,' wheezed the Italian *gigolo*, turning his Titanic profile, with true Scottish acumen, towards the camera.

'Over hill and dale, through sunrise and sunset . . .'

'Mother o' mine,' repeated the *gigolo*, rolling the 'r,' and giving an extra Scottish twist to his chin.

Whereupon the picture suddenly switched, with unaccountable speed, to the aforesaid hills, dales, sunrises, and sunsets, through and over which the Italian *gigolo*, who had somewhere changed his kilt, forged relentlessly, followed always by Mother Love, which was delineated by a misty shape in the top left-hand corner of the screen . . . ('misty shapes by Karl Skunkenboom,' murmured Donald to himself).

This exquisite nonsense delighted them for the space of some twenty minutes. Then, delight gave way to something deeper. The love motive began.

'I love you.'

'I love you.'

Across the screen the grey shapes fluttered, met, and mingled. And by some curious remote alchemy – chemical, spiritual, mechanical, who knows? – their mingling was the signal for many other minglings. In lofty, shadowed galleries, beneath Cupids and smoky Venuses, throughout the length and breadth of this theatre, body drooped to body, hand was linked to hand. And Donald murmured:

'He's saying it for me.'

Pauline looked at him with starry eyes, 'And she's saying it for me, too.'

Whereupon the woman by their side, who had slaughtered numberless caramels with her own jawbone, emitted a startling 'Ssh!'

They both started violently. They had forgotten that there was anybody else in the world. Then Donald suddenly reached for his hat:

'Let's get out of this,' he grunted. 'I've got something to tell you.'

She followed him up the immense soaring staircase. A thousand eyes seemed to regard her. In her wake boomed the fretful love story whose ghostly echoes they were about to transmute into human vibrations.

V

They stood in the very middle of a vast hall, that looked like a mixture of Ely Cathedral, Madame Alice Foote Macdougall's tea shop and the haunt of the Rhine maidens. Around them stretched wastes of deep piled carpet. Above them towered a roof terrifically gilt. And there, in that desert, they kissed. Whereupon they both laughed, like children who have done something very daring. They retreated to the shadow.

'When did you first know?' he demanded breathlessly.

'Oh, dear. . . .' Pauline was almost crying. 'I don't know. When you telephoned, I believe.'

'I knew at the station. Didn't you see me raise my hat and smile?'

'Yes . . . I saw.'

'The King of England wouldn't have made me raise my hat just then . . . I was so sore . . . but you. . . . Gee, Pauline, this is great, isn't it?'

They held hands. He faced her, his legs wide apart, grinning. 'Say something, darling.'

'What shall I say?'

'You know what.'

'Do I?'

Fantastic, idiotic flirtation . . . not meet to be transcribed. Yet she said as he had commanded. . . . 'I love you,' and he echoed her words, and their lips met again.

Then he clapped his hands together.

'We've got to dance to-night!'

'Oh, we must!'

'We've never danced together . . . and I'm swell!'

'So am I!'

'I could dance with you on the edge of the world!'

'And up into the stars,' she laughed. 'We can't go on being sentimental.'

'Can't we? Try me and see!'

They stood there, in the absurd Gothic hall, and they looked so young and so much in love that the attendant – who was dressed in a costume which combined, with elegant impartiality, the main features of the Pope's guard, the London beefeaters, and the Greek Evsons, spat disgustedly into a Gothic umbrella stand. He had been married ten years, and for him the gilt had worn off love.

'Come on!' he cried. 'We'll get a taxi, and go some place.'

And then Pauline remembered. 'In case.' The phrase rang through her head like a note of doom.

'Yes,' she said. Her voice trembled. 'Yes,' she repeated. But she stood quite still.

'Well . . . what's the matter?'

'It's nothing.' She twisted her fingers nervously round the handle of her bag. 'I . . . I only promised I'd ring up.'

'Irela?'

She nodded.

'What about?'

'She just said . . . "in case" . . .'

'In case what?' She did not answer him. He was frowning at her. 'Say, what's the idea? What can she want with you at this hour?'

'I don't know . . . nothing, I expect.'

'Then why d'you have to call her up?'

'She asked me to . . . she did . . . honestly. . . .'

'I don't doubt she did.' His voice was grim. 'All the same, I don't see why in hell . . . oh, I'm sorry. But you're not a child, darling. And on this night, of all nights. . . .'

She put her hand on his arm. 'I know. Don, I'm sure it'll be all right. She's probably in bed and asleep, long ago. But I did promise. So . . . do you mind?'

How could he possibly mind, when she looked at him like that? He shrugged his shoulders, and kissed his hand to her as she went quickly to the little telephone-box in the corner of the hall.

Pauline stood in the tiny telephone-box. A brilliant light glared down upon her. There seemed hardly an ounce of air in this curious little cage, and even the few breaths that remained were heavily scented with Chypre. As she lifted the receiver and gave the number she asked herself, 'Why is it that the women who use telephone-boxes always smell of Chypre? Is it because they are women 'of a certain type'? Are they always making rendezvous with lovers . . . are they invariably strange, homeless creatures who inhabit rooms without telephones, without comfort, with nothing but a bed . . . on which they lie and lie, paying for life and hoping for death?' She closed her eyes. These thoughts were idiotic, morbid . . . born of Chypre and bad air.

Through the scented distance a voice echoed, 'Two pennies, please.' She groped in her bag. Would she never find the pennies? Ah, here they were! A new one, and an old bent one. One of them with the handsome and imposing profile of King George v, the other bearing only a faint but suggestive three-quarter face of the late Queen Victoria. What would the late Queen Victoria have thought of this escapade? What would she have said of girls who stood in immorally scented hutches towards the hour of midnight, preparing to tell falsehoods to their employers . . . especially when those employers were as eminent as Irela?

One, two. The pennies were in. A voice echoed, 'You're thr-r-rough.' And then, as though from another planet she heard John saying 'Hullo?'

John! She closed her eyes. Almost imperceptibly her slight figure swayed. She felt like some prisoner, on reprieve, who meets by chance in the street the warder who has lately guarded him. During those last few hours she had soared . . . she had been a person . . . an independent human being . . . a unit, free to explore, to drift, to adventure. And now, the voice of John was enough to make her cower again, to make her moisten her lips nervously, and say:

'It's Miss Joycey. Is her ladyship in bed yet?'

'Just hold the line, miss. I'll go and see.'

She held the line. For a brief, scared moment she lifted her eyes, and saw Donald watching her. She tried to smile, but she could not. For she knew in advance that she had sealed her own doom. This telephone that she was holding was like the end of a rope which tethered her.

John's voice came through again.

'Are you there, miss?'

'Yes.'

'Her ladyship says will you please to come home at once. It's very important, her ladyship says.'

'Yes.'

She put down the receiver. She stood quite still. It was Donald who opened the door.

'She wants you?'

She nodded. She was almost crying.

'And are you going?'

'What else can I do?'

He took her arm. He did not speak angrily. He said, 'Oh, Pauline, you poor dumb little thing. Can't you ever do what you want to do?'

'How can I?'

He regarded her thoughtfully. 'Gee . . . it seems I've taken on a tough proposition. The girl who can't say no.'

'But, Don . . .' There was a desperate note in her voice. 'I'm not a free agent. After all, Irela employs me.'

'Even servants get a night off sometimes.'

'No, no. It's not fair of you to say that. Something may have happened . . . something dreadful. She said it was very important.'

'Perhaps she's lost her spectacles and wants you to read her the evening paper.'

'You mustn't say those things. Please, you mustn't.'

She led him to the entrance. They stood at the top of the steps, forlornly. They looked very different from the proud, exultant pair that had aroused the envy of the attendant a few minutes before. All the vitality seemed to have been drained from Pauline. She drooped, and her face was white.

'We must get a taxi, I suppose.'

They spoke little on the way home. When they said good-bye she clung to him, trembling, her fingers clutching his arms tightly.

VI

She knocked at the door of Irela's room.

'Come in.'

Irela sat up in bed. She wore her lace cap and her tortoiseshell spectacles. A glass of milk was by her side.

'There you are, darling!'

Pauline stood in the doorway. 'What is it?'

'What is what?'

'What has happened?'

'Happened?' Irela spoke somewhat sharply. 'Nothing has happened. Only what *will* happen if you don't shut the door is that I shall catch a cold in the draught.'

Pauline shut the door. 'John said it was very important.'

'Did he?'

'Wasn't it?'

Irela shuffled her feet under the bedclothes. 'Really, my dear, you're behaving very strangely. Has your young man been giving you too much to drink?'

Pauline flushed and said nothing.

'And don't glare at me like that, please, darling. I don't think it's very kind of you. Here have I been alone all the evening, feeling wretchedly ill, while you go gadding about with strange young men – not that I complain of that – I'm modern, thank heaven – and when you ring up at midnight . . .'

'It's only half-past eleven now.'

'Well, what of it?' she cried. 'When do you want to come in? Or did you want to stay out all night?'

Pauline turned to the door. Irela saw the disgust on her face, realized she had gone too far. . . .

'Please, please . . . I didn't mean that . . . forgive me.' Suddenly she began to whimper. 'I'm upset, overwrought. It was Kober. He rang up, just before you did. He said the bookings for Baba were bigger than for me. He told me *that*, at this time of night! I couldn't sleep. . . . I felt lonely. . . . Please, Pauline, please . . .'

The tears streamed down her face. She looked, even in the shaded light of the reading-lamp, a very old woman, in great distress.

She held out her hands. Pauline, with a quick gesture of forgiveness, went to her. She knelt down by her side, and closed her eyes. Irela, still sobbing, smoothed her hair.

'I shouldn't have asked you . . .' she said brokenly, 'but I *had* to speak to somebody. I'm so nervous nowadays. My voice . . . all these rôles . . . I don't remember things as well as I did . . . I was going through the score of *Bohème* in my head and I muddled up some of the recitatives. . . .' She paused and sighed, a long, trembling sigh. 'Don't let's think of it. Tell me about yourself . . . about your evening.'

Pauline told her. She, too, was eager to speak to somebody. She began at the beginning, not knowing where her words would lead her. Speaking in a soft, excited voice, she told what they had eaten for dinner, what Donald had said, she explained the plot of the film, she reached the part where the film lovers had appeared . . . she paused.

She looked up. Irela's eyes were closed. Her mouth drooped open, revealing a lolling tongue. There came from the magic throat a long, weary snore.

CHAPTER EIGHT

I

You may have read accounts, in ladies' magazines, of how a *prima donna* spends her day when she is going to sing at night. If so, you will certainly have been impressed by the sweet and peaceful atmosphere in which, according to these legends, she surrounds herself. 'I try to think only beautiful thoughts,' says one. 'I spend ze day een my garden reading Skekspere,' says the other. One would think that, instead of preparing to sing, the *prima donna* was preparing to have a baby. There may be, perhaps, a solitary *originale*, like Mary Garden, who admits that before singing she goes for a stiff walk with a girl friend, but such spirits are rare. The ladies' magazines prefer that their idols should move gently, with parted lips and starry eyes, in a sort of divine haze, like the women in Maeterlinck's plays.

Irela seldom moved gently and she was never in a haze. But on the morning of the great day she woke unusually early, and lay staring at the ceiling. She lay, and she sniffed, fiercely, through her delicate nostrils. Good – the nose was clear. Then she put her hands over her head and shook her wrists – for she had a curious superstition that this action increased the circulation. Then she blew out her cheeks like a balloon, contracted them again, and repeated the operation a dozen times, for this action was supposed to frighten off crows' feet. Then she scratched her head and sighed.

She was not exactly nervous, but she was extremely apprehensive. The difference between those two adjectives is fundamental. Nervousness is due to a lack of reasoning, apprehension to a surfeit of it. Irela was too good an artist not to be apprehensive. She knew she *might* crack on the last rendering of the phrase 'addio senza rancor.' She knew there would be many places where it would be difficult to sustain a breath. She knew, too, that there would be a great many people in the audience who had never heard her before, for it was over twelve years since she had sung in opera in England. It was the thought of this younger generation, who would be brought by their fathers and mothers, that most disturbed her. They would be expecting so much . . . so impossibly much. . . . They had been fed on the Irela legend, which she had been at such pains to foster. They would not have memories to tell them that the legend was true . . . with them she would have to begin all over again, to win her laurels for the first time. And if she did not come up to their expectations, they would sneer, and tell their fathers and mothers that perhaps she might have been the Edwardians' idea of a great singer, but she was not theirs.

'If only,' she thought, 'I could have it all back, just for five minutes . . . just for five minutes when

I am singing the "addio" . . . just to be able to sustain the high B flat instead of clipping it, as I do now . . . even for one minute . . . I would show them a new world.'

She tossed uneasily on her bed. These thoughts were morbid. She must not give way to them. She rang the bell for Tremlowe. After she had spoken a few home truths to her, Tremlowe's thoughts were morbid too. But Irela was feeling much better.

II

It was just ten when Pauline came downstairs, and as she passed the music-room she heard Irela trying out her voice. Tensely, she listened. By now she knew all the variations, all the tones and half-tones which indicated whether she was 'in voice' or not.

The familiar sounds began. First a great deal of pushing and bumping with the music stool. Then impatient footsteps clattering over the polished floor. She was closing a window. Then more bumping with the music stool, and a loud bang as she lifted back the lid of the piano.

All these noises were accompanied by violent clearings of the throat. There is a legend – by whom begun, God only knows, certainly by no musician – there is a legend that singers do not clear their throats. Whether it is considered unladylike for them to do so, or whether it is thought that their vocal chords are too delicate to withstand the strain of such a common action, it is impossible to say.

Certainly Irela cleared her throat every morning of her life, with harsh, emphatic scrapes. Anybody listening to her would have thought that she had either swallowed a crumb the wrong way round or was about, quite firmly and efficiently, to spit.

The throat-clearing having been achieved, she struck the chord of C major and sang 'Ma!' on low C. She began the note with closed lips and then opened them, so that it was really a hum which expanded into a clear note. This was Irela's favourite exercise, to which, she maintained, a great deal of her amazing freshness was due. Perhaps it may be an old trick of the trade, known to all singers. It evidently stood her in good stead.

She 'ma'd' up the octave and down again, sometimes repeating a note several times when it did not seem to her clear enough, pausing on it and singing, with a certain timbre of indignation. Pauline, listening at the door, was inconsequently reminded of a sheep bleating for its mamma. Her lips parted in a smile. She checked it immediately, as a form of irreverence, but she was glad that she could smile, because it showed that Irela was in very good form.

The scales were soon finished. Irela never 'practised' for long . . . a fact which always puzzled those who had been brought up on the popular legend that great singers warble incessantly all day. If they do, they may be great singers, but they will not sing for long. Irela once wrote an extremely rude letter to a famous novelist whose heroine, a *prima donna*, practised scales for three hours every morning. The letter was full of disjointed abuse, but there did emerge from it the interesting fact that even when she was a girl studying her rôles, she never sang for more than two hours a day. She studied in her head at the piano, learning each phrase with her keen, retentive brain, fixing it as much by sight as by sound, and only gently humming it when it was perfect.

The *arpeggios* began. First low, beginning at A, then up the scale, up, up. . . . Pauline was anxious again. What would the top C be like? Oh, what *would* it be like? Clear or woody? Even more important than that, loud or soft? For if it was loud, danger was ahead. This much had she learnt from Irela, that *you must never sing a high note unless you can sing it pianissimo*. Over and over again had she barked this advice at young singers. 'I shall crack if I sing it softly,' young girls would wail. 'Crack then!' They would refuse, still bellowing the note with the full force of their lungs. But eventually they gave in. And whether they cracked or not, they sang their top notes *pianissimo* for the rest of their lives.

Up to A . . . that was all right . . . B flat . . . pretty good . . . B natural. Oh, dear, she was getting louder . . . and then C, *fortissimo*! Pauline bit her lip. This was rather dreadful. True, it had been a beautiful note, round and crystalline, but the fact that Irela had sung it *fortissimo* showed that she was funking, and she never funked without reason. Pauline heard the piano lid bang back again, and the stool being pushed aside, and she fled downstairs just in time.

Irela met her in the morning-room. She looked restless and uneasy, but she made no mention of her voice. She did not even answer Pauline's 'Good morning.' All she said was, 'I've got to go and see Campbell Bliss. Are you ready?' Pauline went upstairs to put on her hat.

III

It was eleven o'clock when they arrived at Campbell Bliss's house in Harley Street.

Bliss was an old Scotsman who had been for some years the most famous throat specialist in London – possibly in Europe. He had gazed, with suitable emotions, at the exalted uvulas of most of the Spanish princes, and had sprayed the palates of enormous bearded Chancellors from Central Europe. He had made Mussolini say 'Gee, gee,' as though he were a little boy, and had delivered pound after pound of glycerine lozenges to St. James's Palace, where they were, let us hope, dutifully sucked. Life sometimes seemed to him to be an endless succession of yawning mouths. It would appear, indeed, that he had only to arrive on the distant horizon for people to open their mouths. 'Even if I were Daniel in the lions' den,' he once said, 'I believe I should ask the lions to say "Ah!" '

With Irela, however, it was different. For one thing, her throat gave him an artistic pleasure. After they had entered his consulting-room, and Irela had introduced Pauline, he turned to her and said:

'Look here, young lady, I'll give you an object lesson as to why madame's the greatest singer in the world. Look at this, to begin with. . . .'

He placed his hand on Irela's shoulders, ran it caressingly up her neck, not as a lover, but as though he were a sculptor cherishing a fine piece of work.

'No singer I've ever known had a neck like that,' he went on. 'It's the ideal formation. Now show your teeth.'

'Damn it, Campbell, I'm not a horse.'

'Show your teeth,' commanded the old man.

Irela grinned at him. They were wonderful teeth for a woman of sixty – firm, white, and even.

'Now open your mouth.'

Irela folded her arms. She was not angry, but she was impatient. 'I'm singing to-night and if you want to make a medical exhibit of me you can do it another time.'

'What – nervous, at your age?' he chaffed.

'That's a rude thing to say, Campbell Bliss, and you know it. Yes, I am nervous.'

'You. Pshaw!'

'I couldn't take my top C *pianissimo* this morning,' she snapped.

He looked at her gravely. All hint of banter gone. Then he smiled – a very kind smile – shook his head, said, 'You're a wonderful woman, Irela.'

He nodded several times. Then briskly he said, 'Open wide.'

She opened. He looked into her throat long and deep. Sprayed it for a moment, looked again. Pauline was aching with anxiety. He took a little instrument with a magnifying glass attached to a nickel handle. After this last examination he frowned at her and said:

'If I didn't know you were a well-behaved woman I'd say you'd got a corn on your vocal chords.'

'*What?*' Irela glared at him angrily. 'How could I have a corn with *my* method? Don't you know I've cured more corns on vocal chords by my exercises than you'd ever cure if you lived to be a hundred and fifty?' She snorted. 'You're drunk.'

'All right. I'm drunk.'

She became suddenly pleading. 'Campbell, what is it?'

'It's only a slight inflammation.'

'Nothing else?'

'Nothing.'

'Then why,' she said, angry again, 'did you talk such damned nonsense about corns?'

'I didn't say you had one. I said if you weren't such a well-behaved girl I'd suspect you of having one.'

'It was a very tactless thing to say.'

'Have you ever known me be tactful – in forty years?' he asked as he handed her a prescription.

She gave him an enchanting smile. Instantly she seemed once more her old self. She burbled, and warbled, and chattered. She did her imitation of an owl making love. She fluttered round the room – clumsily, it is true, a little creakily – but she fluttered. Then she lay back in a big leather chair, out of breath, kicking a tattoo on the floor with her Russian boots.

'Now come, come, Irela,' said Campbell, 'you mustn't carry on like that or the other patients will think we're having a love affair.'

She ignored his reproof. 'Tell darling Pauline what a wonderful woman I am.'

'Hasn't she found that out already?'

Pauline laughingly assured him that she had.

'Well, I'll tell you this,' said Bliss, gravely regarding Pauline through his spectacles; 'if Irela hadn't been the greatest singer in the world, she'd have been a great business woman. 'The trouble with you,' he went on, turning to Irela again, 'is that you ought to have been a man.'

'Get along with you!' cried Irela, adoring it all.

'How much money have you got?' he demanded shrewdly.

'Never you mind!'

'You see?' he said to Pauline, 'she's got so much money that she doesn't know what to do with it. And it's all in gilt-edged securities.'

In such ponderous, but not unpleasant banter, passed the next ten minutes. Then a footman arrived and informed them that an ex-Archduke was, at that moment, impatiently waving an inflamed uvula in the waiting-room, and they made their departure.

IV

Pauline, by now, was beginning to realize that the task of being a companion to Irela, on this day of days, was no sinecure. Although it was barely twelve o'clock, she was already beginning to feel a little exhausted. Irela, however, was still bubbling over.

She bounced up and down in the car like an aged roysterer, her pearls jangling, her hat with the paradise plumes slightly awry, emitting little shrill laughs. It was really a form of nerves which, had she been a less vital woman, would have reduced her to a trembling mass.

Then she changed again, suddenly sinking back into the car and biting her finger-nails. They were bound for Hampstead Heath.

'Lower the window, darling,' she snapped, in anything but a 'darling' voice. 'No. Not so much. There, that's better.' A moment later. 'There's a fearful draught. You'll have to shut it again.'

Then she peered at Dingley. 'Dingley's neck's red,' she said in gloomy tones.

'Oh, I don't think *very* red,' murmured Pauline.

'I didn't say *very* red, did I?' Irela glared at her. 'You must be accurate, darling. When I say a thing I mean it.'

'Do you think,' hastily asked Pauline, 'that it always means he's been drinking? I mean, it's very cold, and that might make his neck red?'

'Why should cold make his neck red? Does your neck go red when you're cold?'

Pauline felt somewhat at a loss to answer this unusual question. She had never worked out the relative effects of temperature and the colour of necks.

'Of course he's been drinking,' continued Irela. 'I've a good mind to tell him so.'

'Oh – *please* don't upset yourself to-day, not to-day.'

'I've a good mind to,' brooded Irela. 'Why I don't sack him, I don't know. He told me yesterday his wife's got another baby coming. It's disgusting, the amount of babies he makes that wretched woman have. This must be about the tenth since last October. I wouldn't stand it, if I were her.'

She stared malevolently at the tell-tale neck of the uxorious Dingley. Pauline longed to present him with a tin of talc powder which he might use in emergencies.

Up and down Hampstead Heath they walked. There was a cold wind, that fleered across the surface of the artificial pond, causing it to break into icy spray at the edges. The few draggled ducks on its surface buried their heads in their feathers. They descended into a hollow, where the wind was less keen. Sad, grey pieces of newspaper fluttered about them. Overhead the sky was like a slate on which a tired, cross child had chalked a blurred design. Irela clung to Pauline's arm as they picked their way down the desolate, twisted paths.

'How very strange and unlikely all this is!' thought Pauline. 'Here am I, with the greatest singer in the world – a woman whose name will never be erased from the scroll of history – a woman who, with Patti and Jenny Lind, will always be remembered as long as music is remembered – and I am guiding her down a horrible little path on Hampstead Heath in a cold wind, talking about her chauffeur's neck! To-day is one of the greatest days of her whole career – if only I could dramatize it I should be so thrilled that I should not have lived in vain – yet I cannot dramatize it. How can one dramatize Hampstead Heath? Irela ought to be lying at home, pale and abstracted, with lilies about her, and a tall, white-haired lover hovering near the window, reminding her of the days when she sang for him in Venice, when they were young, when spring was in the air, and the grey palaces were necklaced with laburnum, and the moonlight quivered to the ecstasy of mandolines, singing songs older than the Italian hills, older than the echoes that linger in the caves of the Italian hills. . . .'

Irela stopped, paused, shivered. She said, 'I hope that damned Mrs. McPherson hasn't forgotten that I can't have any salt in anything for lunch.'

V

Salt!

This was the theme that occupied them as they drove home. The iniquity of salt! How it did this to the vocal chords, and that to the stomach, and the other to the nervous system! How it would be quite impossible for Irela to sing a note if she touched salt . . . if she even smelt salt! By the time that they arrived at Charles Street, Pauline felt convinced that the menu would be composed of kippers and salted almonds.

However, all was well. The sole was utterly devoid of salt, and was cooked to perfection. The baked apple, too, by a happy chance, betrayed no signs of the sinister salt. Nor, by a unique coincidence, did any salt appear to have drifted into the coffee. Irela finished her lunch with a sigh of satisfaction, wiped her lips with a napkin, and said, with surprising animation, 'Dommies!'

Pauline had discovered that there was a certain technique to be observed when one played dominoes with Irela. First, it was necessary to comment on the beauty of the dominoes themselves. They were backed with mother of pearl and the pips were daintily painted in gold to represent rosebuds. Irela always liked to begin the game by explaining who gave them to her. . . .

'It was the Duc de Gravennes,' she said. 'He adored me. He used often to come over from Paris when I was singing, and have a special train from Dover. Oh, so chic. Everybody had special trains in those days. Now, of course, the income-tax man has made all that sort of thing quite impossible. And one day, in Paris, we had been dining together, and we went to see the apaches in the Rue de Lappe, and they were playing dominoes, and a divine apache – oh, so *farouche* – fell in love with me and wanted to teach me to play. The Duc made a terrible scene, because he was jealous. But he was sorry the next morning and he sent me these. Aren't they twee?'

They played an extremely simple variety of the game, in which the score is reckoned in multiples of five, counting the terminals only. Irela was a slow counter. She had, too, various idiosyncrasies which were inclined to pall, after one had been playing for a little while. Thus, whenever she counted up to seven, she piped, in imitation of a child:

'One, two, three, four, five, six, seven,
All good children go to heaven.'

After each of these exercises of wit, she laughed shrilly, and looked across at her opponent, who was expected to laugh too. The opponent found no difficulty in laughing, for the first two or three times, but after that, any laughter, to appear spontaneous, must involve considerable physical discomfort.

Irela was in fighting mood this afternoon, and played with great skill. Perhaps her skill was slightly due to the artifices of Pauline, who endeavoured, on every possible occasion, to avoid scoring, and often managed to retain in her hand, at the end of the game, the double six which counted against her. Each time that this happened Irela shrilled with delight.

'Mossy face!' she cried, pointing to Pauline's double-six. 'You've got mossy face.' Pauline never knew exactly why the double-six should be called mossy face, but she accepted the phrase in the spirit in which it was delivered.

And this, they played, and played, and played.

VI

Pauline looked at the clock. Would this day drag on for ever?

It was half-past three. Five hours before the curtain would go up! She was going to the opera with Donald – this much had Irela allowed her – perhaps because she had not been able, at the time, to think of an adequate excuse.

But Irela did not know that she was also meeting Donald beforehand. They had arranged a rendezvous for half-past five, by the little statue that stands, so forlorn and forgotten, at the southern end of Berkeley Square. Why they had made this rendezvous Pauline could not imagine, since in any case they were going to the opera together. Still, there it was, and she was determined not to fail him.

Fortunately, fate worked in her favour. They had tea at half-past four . . . or rather, Pauline had tea while Irela watched her. Then at five Irela said she was tired and would rest for an hour.

'You won't be going out, I suppose?' she said, as she stepped into the lift.

'I don't expect so,' replied Pauline.

Within five minutes she had gone.

*

Her heart leapt as she saw him standing there, in his preposterously light American coat, a white muffler round his neck. She ran to him as to a refuge from the world's troubles. He drew her into the darkness of the porch of a house that was 'to let.'

'Oh, Don, I'm so tired,' she whispered. 'And I love you so!'

His lips against hers – strong, masculine lips – the faint smell of tobacco – the flutter of his eyelashes against her cheeks – the smooth, sleek feeling of the nape of his neck as her hands caressed him. He held her so fast – all the strength of the world seemed to lie in his embrace – and she leant back in loving surrender, closing her eyes. For a tiny, exquisite eternity they remained. Then she looked at him. His eyes were still closed, as his face hovered above hers, and she noticed how long were the black lashes, and the one deep furrow on his forehead, and the thick wave in his hair. Noticed these things? Truer it were to say that she checked them – these things of which she had so often and so lately dreamed – checked them in the adorable catalogue of love.

He opened his eyes.

'Aren't we crazy?' he said. His voice was sleepy . . . dazed.

'Yes. We're crazy.' She rubbed her small chin against his.

'I love you,' he said.

'I love you,' she said. And in a level voice, added, 'If you say that again, I shall cry.'

He held her more tightly. Overhead the keen winter wind assaulted the naked branches of the plane trees. There was a rustling and a shivering in the square. From the great trees round Lansdowne House there boomed an echo that seemed to come from frozen, distant seas. Oh, this . . . this was the purpose of life . . . this was the one reality to be extracted from a world of gibbering shadows. And the sentence they had just repeated was the only sentence that rang true in a universe of empty sounds and insane echoes.

She said it again silently, with her lips alone, as lovers do when they love deeply. He saw the movement of her lips and said:

'What's the matter, honey?'

She detached herself gently, and smiled at him. 'Nothing,' she said. 'Oh, nothing at all.' She sighed deeply. The cold air seemed to fill her lungs, to sting her back to sense. Her eyes opened wide. They both laughed.

Then, remembering, she put her hand in the pocket of her coat. 'Your ticket.'

'Gee – that's swell.' He took it, examining it with awe. 'P148. Is it next to yours?'

'Of course it is. At the back, too. So that she won't see us.'

'You didn't have to pay for it?'

'Of course not.'

'Is she all right?'

For the moment she had forgotten Irela. 'Yes . . . oh, yes. . . . But naturally it's a little nerve-racking.'

Then, abruptly, as though she heard a voice calling her, she said, 'I must go.'

'So soon?'

'We'll be seeing each other again in an hour or two.'

Lightly, then, their lips brushed together. For a moment they looked into each other's eyes. There was so much to say, so little time to say it. They wondered, both of them, 'Will there ever be time?'

VII

The clock struck six as Pauline slipped through the front door. The hall was misty, and yet it seemed overheated. The lights were turned on in the drawing-room. She decided that it would be best to be quite honest about having gone out, though she would not, of course, say anything about Donald. She would make up some fib. Before she had decided what the fib should be, Irela's voice was calling 'Pauline!'

'Coming!'

Irela was sitting on the sofa near the fire. A small table, covered with a white cloth, as though laid for supper, stood in front of her. All round, on the floor and spread over the cushions, were the evening newspapers.

'Where have you been?' asked Irela sharply.

'Well . . .' Pauline hesitated. Then her eyes noticed the newspapers and she said, 'I just ran out to get a paper.'

'Why?' She looked at her curiously. Then suddenly her expression changed. 'Oh, I see,' she said, more amiably. 'You wanted to see if that scoundrel, Kober has been saying anything else. Well, he has. Look at this!'

She picked up the *Evening Clarion*, which was so rumpled that it looked as though it had been used to light the fire, and pointed to a small paragraph in the 'Londoner's Diary.' She read:

'*By the way, I saw Arthur Kober, the celebrated impresario, lunching at the Ritz with the charming Lady Hope Martineau. Mr. Kober is, of course, taking a very important part in the present opera season, which the evergreen Irela is initiating at the Imperial Theatre to-night. Chatting with him, over liqueurs, he told me that Londoners would be entranced by the new star, Baba Letoile, who makes her début in* Lucia *on Monday night.*'

'Oh, dear,' said Pauline, when she had finished reading. She could not think of anything else to say. The paragraph did not strike her as very terrible, but it had evidently upset Irela very much indeed, for she cried:

'Intriguing still, you see! And at a time like this!'

Pauline shook her head sympathetically.

'Evergreen!' snorted Irela. 'As though I were a damned Christmas tree.'

'Perhaps he didn't say it. . . . '

'Then he probably said I was dried up. Why the ex-soldiers don't tar and feather him I can't imagine.'

Pauline said nothing. When Irela began to invoke the aid of the mythical body of ex-soldiers who were to tar and feather Arthur Kober, she knew that it was best to hold her peace.

'And why,' continued Irela, with ever-rising wrath, 'that fool of a Millie Rockstone allows her daughter to lunch with Bolshevik rats like Kober, I can't imagine either. I'd speak to her if I thought it would do any good. But it wouldn't. He's hypnotized the girl – that's what he's done.'

'Oh, really. . . .'

'Yes he has,' interrupted Irela. 'He's a hypnotist. He looks at them with those snake's eyes, and he pushes his big nose up against their faces, and he plays the piano to them and then it's all up. The police ought to be told about it . . . they ought.'

She swayed backwards and forwards, clutching and unclutching the heavily jewelled fingers. Pauline noticed the nervous gesture, and noticed, with a pang of pity, that they were the hands of an old woman; an old, lonely, angry woman who, in a few hours' time would be drifting across the stage before an immense audience, in the guise of a young girl. She sat down beside Irela, looked into the raddled face, put her hand gently on the old shoulders. . . .

Irela swept her hand away. 'No, you can't fool me,' she cried, and her voice was the voice of a woman obsessed. 'I know that man and his filthy ways. Talking about Baba Letoile . . .' and here, with a hideous, infantile gesture she made a 'baby' face, and croaked in baby language, 'Leetle Baba Letoile. . . .' Then she threw back her head, and looked stern and suddenly magnificent. 'How dare he talk about Baba Letoile in the same breath as Irela? How *dare* he?'

'Nobody ever would . . . nobody,' declared Pauline loyally.

'Oh my dear. . . .' She turned and clutched Pauline's hand. 'I wish you were a man, to punish him! I wish you were a man. . . .'

They stayed like that, silently for a few moments. The fire flickered on the hearth, the clock ticked on, faster, faster. Pauline looked up and saw that it was ten past six. She rose to her feet.

'Now you mustn't upset yourself any more,' she said.

Irela shook her head mournfully, and stared into the fire.

'It's ten past six already.'

'What?' Instantly all recrimination, all mournful regret, was banished. She tugged the bell. The chic and dissipated John appeared, cringed before her wrath, brought hot soup and a dozen oysters. The soup was swallowed, and the oysters were devoured while Pauline hurried up to dress. At a quarter to seven they set off for the theatre, and now panic, deadly, sickening panic seized Pauline, while Irela was as calm as a woman without a heart.

CHAPTER NINE

I

THEY did not speak in the car. All the way, Pauline was fearful that something would happen. The fog had given place to rain, and the roads were slippery. If there were a skid. . . . But there was no skid. The admirable Dingley, whose comparatively pale neck testified to his temporary abstention in honour of the occasion, drove them swiftly and surely through the crowded, noisy streets.

Pauline, glimpsing the men and women who flashed by, like marionettes under their glistening umbrellas, marvelled at the number of people in the world who would *not* be hearing Irela to-night, people who would not be frightened nor exhilarated, people who would merely go to their homes, and perhaps a cinema, to return and cook sausages over a hissing gas fire. There was something vaguely comforting in the thought that for quite a considerable number of the world's inhabitants, the manner in which Irela sang to-night was a matter of comparative indifference. Foolishly her mind fluttered, in that brief space, over the world's surface, seeking consolation. She tried to think of Indian coolies, who would not cease for a moment from picking rice, or whatever coolies picked, because of Irela's performance. Of sailors on the cold, oily depths of the Atlantic, to whom the winds would bring no echo of her song. Of shepherds on the Attic hills to whom the only significant sound in the world's symphony was the tinkle of their own sheep-bells. Of *cocottes* in seaports whose heads were fuddled with drink, whose ears buzzed with the perpetual monotone of murderous guitars, to whom Irela meant nothing, nothing at all. Of quiet country vicars who would, even now, be lighting little lamps in their greenhouses to keep the frost from bruising the petals of the young cyclamen.

But when they came in sight of the Imperial Theatre, all these soothing images, the coolies, the sailors, the shepherds, the *cocottes*, and even the vicars, were swept away, and panic reigned supreme.

Panic flickered from the immense electric sign which proclaimed the word:

IRELA

It flickered in rose, and yellow, and arsenic green as the lights melted dizzily into one another. She wished that those lights would stay still. There was something sinister in this perpetual change. Underneath, in cold, silver fire, burned the words: 'To-night: *La Bohème*.' Those words were fixed, eternal. Then why should Irela flash, chameleon-like, through so many tinted moods? Was there not a moral – a dire moral – attached to this phenomenon? Was there not some hidden implication that while the opera was the same as ever, the star, the vast, glittering star, was suffering a sad and awful transition?

She made a tremendous effort to put these thoughts from her. But she could not. Panic proclaimed itself in the surging crowds outside the theatre itself. The doors were not yet opened for the gallery, and the queue seemed to stretch half-way down Shaftesbury Avenue. As they glided past, to the stage door entrance, Pauline had a vision of hundreds of patient men and women who had been waiting there since dawn. Some of them, those who were nearest the doors, had lined up the night before. This much of their life had they sacrificed, this much had they denied themselves of food and drink, even of the common amenities of sleep and rest. For what? For a legend. No, she staunchly told herself. For no legend. For the reality of beauty which still lingered in Irela's throat.

Overwhelmed with emotion, she put her hand on Irela's. Her eyes were wet with tears. 'I'm so proud,' she whispered, 'so proud.'

To which Irela replied, 'I hope that damned Tremlowe hasn't forgotten to put the tuck in my wig.'

A less sensible girl than Pauline might have been grieved by this response to her emotional outburst. But Pauline merely smiled. She was glad Irela was still calm, still mistress of the situation. She herself had, by now, surrendered utterly to panic. She could not control her knees. She could not even control her face.

Panic increased as the minutes sped by. It echoed in the corridors as they clattered to the big dressing-room. People pressed against the walls to let Irela pass. The crowd outside tried to fight their way through. Irela merely walked on calmly, saying in a cross voice, 'Let me through, please,' and digging a would-be worshipper in the ribs with her umbrella. Her common sense, her lack of 'pose,' was amazing. A sentimental old stage hand met her at the door of her dressing-room, and said:

'Madame, I rang up the curtain for you at *Lucia*, forty years ago. . . .'

Irela replied, 'Yes, and you almost rang it down on my head, damn you, Tom,' and passed on.

Tremlowe was waiting in the dressing-room. It was a bower of flowers – creamy lilies, stiff, proud carnations, clusters of orchids lolling in purple abandon over the carpet, wreaths of laurel, crowns of roses. In the centre of these tributes stood Tremlowe, watery-eyed.

'Oh, my *lady*!' she said, looking sniffily at the flowers.

'Phew!' cried Irela, throwing off her coat. 'The room stinks. Take the things out.'

Tremlowe sniffed, began to weep, thought better of it, and called a stage hand, who bundled the flowers out into the corridor.

'If I had all the money that people had spent on giving me flowers,' said Irela, as she sat down at the dressing-table, 'I should be a rich woman. Tremlowe, where's that wig?'

Tremlowe produced the wig. Irela fitted it on, pronounced it satisfactory, and proceeded to make up.

For a little while Pauline's panic was lost, submerged in the more powerful personality of this older woman who was so superbly rising to the occasion. Somehow the absence of affectation, of 'shi-shi,' in Irela, was more moving than any languors or wailing protestations. As she looked back on the day, Pauline realized that it had been like the day of a fighter, preparing for some tremendous combat. True, there had been outbursts of nerves and temper. But these had not deflected Irela from the steely purpose of her programme. Her diet, her exercise, her visit to Campbell, her repose . . . everything had been directed to the one idea, that she should sing well to-night. Even the apparently unreasoned frenzy against Kober had been, in reality, a form of challenge against the forces which were arrayed against her. And now, here she was, at ten minutes past seven, fully an hour and a half before the curtain was due to rise, making up with the same cool, deliberate attention which had characterized all her movements during the day.

'This tube of "Twenty-one" is too dry,' she barked to Tremlowe. 'Give me another one.'

Tremlowe handed it to her.

'That's better.'

She smeared it over her face. Watching her, so cruelly outlined in the blazing white lights, with every wrinkle, every sagging pocket of flesh exaggerated, Pauline wondered how this aged face could ever be given even the semblance of youth. Yet, as she watched, the miracle took place. Irela knew every trick of the trade. She had learnt the art of make-up from a little Italian dresser she once employed, years ago, in Chicago, by name Flavian Moresco. Flavian had taught her all that could be known, and more, for he had worshipped her face, not always, it must be admitted, from a distance. He it was who had taught her that with her peculiar bone structure she could afford to emphasize the rouge on the cheek-bones and accentuate an almost white line of powder from the nostrils to the chin. He, too, who told her that she need not fear to paint a monstrous bow around her lips, while she must paint out her eyebrows till they were almost non-existent. He who had prescribed the precise tint of purple for the eyelids, and had charted the blue shadows which must lurk beneath her ears. Irela's make-up, when it was completed, was grotesque and frightening in the bright lights of the dressing-table. But when she stood up, in the half light, when she had slipped on the cunning little dress of black sateen, and placed her hands on her hips in a gesture, she looked to Pauline, for one entranced moment, like a young girl.

'D'you like me?'

'Oh, my *dear*. . . .' Pauline's brimming eyes finished the sentence which she would not complete.

Irela chuckled. 'Well, darling . . . run along now.'

Pauline kissed her hand – so withered, so white with liquid powder. 'God bless you,' was all she could say.

Irela flicked the part of her hand where Pauline's lips had rested. She did not want to have to powder it again. As Pauline left the room she cried, 'And for God's sake, *clap*!'

II

Donald was there, waiting for her. She had gone out to the stage door entrance, for a few minutes, to calm her nerves. Then, looking at her watch, she saw that it was a quarter-past eight, and she hurried back, down the corridors, through the pass door, into the bustling stalls.

She saw him from a distance, sitting in one of the back rows. She was thankful to see that they were next to a pillar against which they could hide.

She pressed his arm. 'Oh, I do hope . . . I do hope,' she whispered, 'that it's going to be all right.'

'Sure, it's going to be all right. How did you leave the old dame?'

She frowned at him, a serious frown. 'You mustn't say that,' she said. 'She's the greatest woman in the world.'

It seemed only a few minutes before the house was full. It was what is known as a brilliant audience. 'Too brilliant,' Pauline thought inconsequently. It seemed to make Irela's ordeal more terrible. Everybody in the world had come to hear her.

Ah! here was the King and the Queen! With the sound of a rushing wind the whole audience rose to its feet. A dramatic gesture, and the white hand of Sovino was raised. The kettledrum beat a military tattoo, announcing the National Anthem. How lovely the Queen looked in white, with diamonds glittering round her fine shoulders! There was another woman in the box with them. Who would that be? A lady-in-waiting, perhaps? The first great chords of the National Anthem swept out like a wave, drowning further thought. Pauline stared straight ahead, like a soldier at attention.

And now indeed it had begun. The lights dipped, dimmed, were extinguished. Now there was nothing but a sense of a vast crowded cave, and in front the little spangles of light in the orchestra. Soon one did not notice even these. . . . One saw only Sovino's hands, like fluttering birds, like white birds, swooping and turning, crazed with melody.

It is windy and boisterous, the brief overture to *Bohème*, a gale blows through the strings, whistles up the wood-wind, rattles in the drums. Whether it is 'great' music or 'little' music need not concern us. It has the quality of *excitement*, which is enough. There was a fever in the brain of the man who wrote it, an infectious fever too, for it spreads always through the darkened houses where it is played, quickening the breath, flushing the cheeks with anticipation. Many lovelier overtures have been written, built on a grander scale, telling of infinitely finer things, drenched in a poetry which finds no echo in Puccini, conceived with a delicacy of which he was incapable. He was not fit, one knows, to buckle the shoes of the great ones. Yet none of them could have written an overture that was so exactly right for this occasion . . . none of them could have ushered in a great *prima donna* with a wilder, sweeter breath.

The curtain was up. Rudolf was singing . . . yes, singing superbly. He walked the stage so easily, his voice drifted so very gaily with this wild wind of melody that was blowing over the footlights. Pauline, who knew every phrase of the opera, had been used, at rehearsals, to pick it into its multiform sections, to count the bars before a *récitatif*. Now she saw it again as a whole and marvelled at its swift progression. Almost she forgot the advent of Irela. Then suddenly a warning phrase made her heart leap within her. In a few moments it would be her cue. It was almost here . . . the knock at the door, and the voice outside. . . . 'Scusi.'

We have said that Puccini was not a great composer. It is an unprofitable observation, leading nowhere, and open to many qualifications. For at certain rare moments, something happens in most Puccini operas which only he could make happen . . . sound becomes drama, a single phrase becomes almost agonizingly articulate. There is a change of key, just before Mimi's entrance in *Bohème*, after she has knocked at the door, where this miracle happens. It happened now. Pauline sat there, her hands clenched tight in her lap. There was a lull in the storm of music. Ah! there was the knock . . . so faint, ah, surely too faint. Was she unwell? . . . Rudolf called, in his grave, sweet tenor, 'Chi e la,' and then, like a wave that swells, reaches a higher shore, and ebbs slowly back, the strings drifted, with a slight *crescendo*, to another key, and from outside the door there came her voice: 'Scusi!'

The enchantment had begun. It was instantaneous. Nobody in the theatre, after those two notes had echoed through it, was quite the same. Some, it is true, were held in the thrall of a legend only . . . they clutched each other's hands and whispered, 'There she is.' And others felt as though they were watching for a queen, leaning eagerly forward with their opera glasses fixed on the door, waiting for it to open and the faint light to shine upon her. But with most of them it was from the voice alone that the magic was born . . . a voice so utterly sweet and young, the voice of a little boy, piping plaintively outside the door, to be let in.

After this – after she had come in and sung the first few bars of 'Me chiamano Mimi,' Pauline surrendered utterly. Irela was singing superbly . . . that was all she cared about. There was no need to worry any more. She lay back, her hand twisted in Donald's, exquisitely happy. And when the curtain came down, and the applause broke around them, sweeping and tumultuous, she still sat there, looking straight ahead.

'I love you,' whispered Donald.

She could only smile and press his hand.

'I'm terribly glad, darling, for your sake.'

She turned to him, and said eagerly, 'Now you understand? You see . . . the spell she has over you?'

He did not smile, nor did he answer.

'Don't you see?' she repeated.

'Yes.' And his voice was strangely grave. 'It almost frightens me.'

'Why?'

'I feel she could do anything she liked with people . . . with *you*.'

'Oh, she could . . . she could!' Pauline did not notice that his eyes were clouded.

'She could dominate you . . . make you do things that you would never normally do . . . just because of her voice, or even the memory of her voice.'

'Yes, yes, indeed!' She had never heard Donald speak so generously of Irela before.

'She could take your heart, and keep it all to herself, couldn't she?'

She looked at him quickly. 'Don, what do you mean?'

'You know.'

Then she smiled at him. She would have liked to put her hand over his eyes and kiss his lips. But all she could do was to say, 'The same old prejudice coming out again!'

'I'm jealous, Pauline . . . terribly jealous.'

'How can you be jealous of a voice?'

'It isn't only a voice . . . it's an enchantment . . . it's a legend. . . . Oh, I don't know what it is. I didn't realize it till to-night.'

'Even so, it's a *woman's* voice.'

'That doesn't make it any better. If it were a man's I could say, "Oh, well, Pauline's just crazy, and she'll forget it." But this . . . there's no getting hold of it. . . . It's like struggling with something that you can't see. . . .'

'Don!' She frowned at him. 'You're being morbid.'

'Am I?' He did not speak for a moment. Then he suddenly smiled. 'Gee – I guess I am! It's just because I love you. When we're married, I'll probably be jealous of the radio, and throw it out of the window.'

'You are glad she's singing so beautifully . . . that it *is* a success – aren't you?'

'Sure I'm glad. Damned glad!'

III

The interval was a short one. People were in their places punctually when the curtain went up. The second act proceeded swiftly, like the carnival that it is. Mimi's part, in this act, is slight . . . there is only a slender ribbon of song that winds through the exquisite embroidery of the chorus . . . the song of the 'Cufietta Rosa.' So slight is the tune, and so strong and varied its accompaniment that Pauline feared Irela's voice might be overwhelmed. Sometimes in rehearsals it had seemed so. But to-night, as soon as she took up the lilting air, it spun and sparkled so clearly that one did not ask whether it was powerful or weak . . . one only knew it was beautiful. The ribbon of melody seemed pure gold, and its background mere homespun cloth.

Another interval. And now, the third act . . . the 'Addio' . . . the only danger spot. Pauline, for the first time in the evening, was gripped by a real fear.

'I'm frightened now . . .' she whispered to Donald, just as the lights were going down. 'The "Addio" is so terribly important. She has to carry it practically alone. And it has to be perfect *legato* singing. . . .'

'Well, it will be, won't it?'

Her hands were trembling absurdly. 'Yes . . . yes . . . I hope so, indeed, but sometimes her voice has failed a little, just on the last phrase. . . .'

'Failed?'

She could not say the word she really wanted to say . . . 'cracked.' It sounded, somehow, like an insult to Irela. Nor was it possible to say any more at all, for the curtain was up again, and there in front of them was the stage, lit by an unearthly light, with the snow falling and the sentry pacing to and fro.

Swiftly the act progressed; too swiftly, it seemed to Pauline. She had a feeling that Sovino's white hands were urging the actors on to some dreadful climax. Dreadful? She started, as the word entered her head. Why was she worrying? Everything was going perfectly. Irela was singing as divinely as she had ever sung in her life . . . the silver notes were laden with sadness as flowers are laden with snow . . . cool silver notes that seemed to have drifted from spaces immensely distant. Here was the 'Addio' itself, and never had it sounded lovelier . . . all was well . . . the last phrase was almost accomplished. . . .

'Addio . . . senza . . .'

And then it happened. The horrible thing happened. The voice cracked. It was absolutely unmistakable. True, she recovered miraculously, by doing the only thing possible, which was to take a quick breath, and to go straight on to the word 'rancor.' But the phrase, by being thus cut in half, was musically ruined.

Pauline felt as though a cold wind blew through the theatre. It was not only Irela's personal tragedy that mattered . . . there was a sense of something that had been living and beautiful that was now dead. As though she had been watching a bird in full flight, that had suddenly crumpled up its wings, shot to the heart. She looked timidly at Donald. She wanted terribly to feel that he was near, that he was suffering too. But no, he was gazing at the stage, as though rapt in a trance. She looked beyond him – everywhere, on people's face there was a look of ecstasy. Was it possible . . . was it conceivable, that they had not noticed? That the great public had been unaware of anything wrong?

She breathed again. There was still this cold, deadening weight on her heart, but it was lifting, little by little. Irela, too, was singing exquisitely again. There seemed nothing wrong. 'Oh, I am too anxious . . . too sensitive about it all,' thought

Pauline. But then she said to herself, 'However, even if the public did not notice, what about the critics?' Again she answered herself, 'Surely the critics would not comment on a single flaw like that when she has given them so much that is lovely?' But she remembered that whether the public noticed it or the critics commented, Irela herself would know – she would feel that she had failed. Oh, it was terrible, this suspense. She longed for the act to be over, to hear the verdict.

The act was over at last. Only the final act now remained, and that was short and easy. Meanwhile the verdict of the audience, so far, seemed to be unmistakable. They were adoring it. That at least was the impression Pauline had. Time and again they recalled Irela, who bowed this way and that, looking absurdly young, curtseyed to the King, caught a bouquet of roses, kissed her hand, bowed again. Pauline decided that she would say nothing to Donald about the disaster. In fact, she had almost persuaded herself that it was not a disaster. Perhaps she might mention it when the next act was over . . . when they were leaving the theatre. Quite casually. Just to set her mind at rest.

They went outside and mingled with the crowd. She tried to hear what people were saying, but Donald would insist on talking. She was so anxious to listen to the general trend of the conversation, that she told Donald to run away for a moment and get the drink which she was sure he wanted. He went off laughing at her intuition.

IV

He had not been gone a moment before something happened which turned her happiness to misery, her pride to a terrible sort of apprehension.

She was standing alone in the corridor. She leant against the wall, looking radiantly pretty, watching the crowds that drifted by, hearing greetings exchanged. She felt a strange exaltation in the fact that she was, so to speak, behind the scenes this evening. She would have liked to cry out, 'I know Irela, and you don't. Yes! I'm her niece. I know what she looks like in bed, what she says in the morning, what she likes to eat. I know everything!'

While she stood dreaming there, her attention was caught by an extremely vociferous group of young men and women who had paused by her side. It was in the apocryphal days of the Bright Young People. One forgets, nowadays, exactly what they did or why they did it, and one has not the energy to remember. It is enough that a dozen of them were standing near Pauline at the moment. The girls had disturbingly flat figures, hair like burnished metal, and dull eyes. The boys were more vivacious . . . attractive in an odd way. The whole group chattered gaily and this is what they said:

'My dear, it's *too* embarrassing. . . .'

'Next year, they'll be giving us Albani. . . .'

'One can see her decaying before one's very *eyes*. . . .'

'My dear, when she cracked, I thought I should *die*. . . .'

'Oh, but that was the *one* part I adored. The *loveliest* crack! And her face . . . too divine. . . .'

'I adore *all* of it. *Lovely* Puccini! Such heavenly nonsense. . . .'

'Do you think she'll crack again? If you think so I shall stay. Otherwise I shall go on to Tony's.'

'Darling, you can't go on to Tony's. He'll still be horribly sober. Besides, I know she's going to crack again . . . dozens of times.'

'If you're sure . . .'

'But of course, angel. She was to sing on the *bed*, and *die*, and it'll be too heavenly.'

'Not on the bed? It can't be true? It isn't true?'

'But, darling, she dies all *over* the bed.'

'Yes – of *consumption!*'

'She *fades* away, with dozens of high C's and coughs and coughs and coughs!'

'No! I *can't* miss it. My dear, supposing she *really* dies. . . .'

'Oh, that would be *too* much to hope for.'

'I think you're all too bitter. I *love* the old war-horse.'

'Could she ever sing?'

'I can't imagine. I must look it up in Greene's *English History*.'

'She must have had *some* voice. . . .'

'She lost it coming through the Rye.'

'Well, what *is* the fuss about?'

'There *must* be *some* explanation.'

'Are you coming on Monday to Baba Letoile?'

'*Nothing* would keep me away. Felix said she was like a nightingale!'

'*How* frightful! Nightingales are *too* nauseating.'

'Don't be tiresome, Laura. You know what I mean.'

'Terrific, she is, they say. She *never* stops. Enormous great notes *booming*.'

'And never cracks. . . . How Irela must *loathe* her!'

'Darling, let's go and have a great deal of brandy.'

'Oh yes . . . yes . . . quickly. . . .'

'No – the curtain's going up. . . . There isn't time. . . .'

'What *does* it matter? She doesn't die for at least half an hour. . . .'

'Well . . . if you promise. . . . Oh, dear, I do hope the *worst* happens . . . don't you?'

Swishing and giggling they trailed off. Pauline stood there, staring after them. She was very pale, and her fists were tightly clenched. Only the fear of making a scene, of drawing more attention to this terrible little group of detractors, had deterred her from breaking into their midst, and crying, 'Shame . . . shame!' Donald came up, hurrying. He threw away his cigarette, and was just going to take her arm and lead her in when he noticed how strange she looked.

'Say, honey, is anything the matter?'

'Oh, Don . . .' she looked at him pitifully. She told him, in broken phrases, what had happened.

But he did not seem to think as seriously of it as she had done. 'Why, they're just a lot of wise guys, that's all. Pull everything to pieces. Their fathers give 'em too much money. Decadent, that's what they are. Can't appreciate a lovely thing when they hear it. Too many young people like that in England. Now, in America . . .'

He was still trying to soothe her when they walked down the aisle and took their seats, just as the lights were lowered.

But Pauline need have had no fears. The last act was a thing of unblemished loveliness. And Irela's triumph, when the curtain fell, appeared to be complete.

V

Donald, having seen Pauline to the stage-door, walked home with an old Fleet Street friend . . . a hard-bitten American newspaper man who free-lanced for the Hearst Press.

'What's your story going to be to-night?' said Donald.

'The Queen wears mauve.'

'Oh, hell. . . . I mean about Irela.'

'There ain't going to be no story about Irela.'

'What? Why not?'

'They're fed up with the old dame over there.'

'But don't you think she's marvellous?'

'Oh, she's marvellous all right. So are the

Pyramids. But I don't cable stories to New York that the Pyramids are still standing.'

'You're tough, aren't you?'

'Sure, I'm tough.' He took the damp stub of his cigar from between his lips, regarded it with regret, sighed, and threw it in the gutter. 'I wouldn't be working in this damned climate if I weren't.'

They walked on. He continued: 'There'll be a story on Monday, all right.'

'Baba Letoile?'

'Yeah. I'm keeping all my high explosives for her.'

'Written your story already?'

'Sure . . . I've written it. The new nightingale that's fluttered here from the South, and all that sort of tripe. Dressing-room besieged by managers with contracts. Long-distance calls from the Metropolitan. Otto Kahn jumps off the Empire State Building out of sheer ecstasy. Hope to God she doesn't get tonsillitis or I shall have to write it all over again.'

'Gee . . . I wish I could make my camera lie like your fountain pen.'

'You can. That was your picture of Irela that got the splash in the *Clarion*, wasn't it?'

'Yeah.'

'Why d'you do it? Because of that girl friend of yours?'

'Never mind.'

He put his hand on Donald's shoulder. 'Well, if you're as wise a guy as I take you for, you'll get her away from that old dame *quick*! See?'

'No, I don't.'

'Oh, yes, you do. I'd rather deal with forty-seven intoxicated mothers-in-law armed to the teeth, than with one Irela. She hasn't got hands. She's got claws. She's got her claws into your girl all right.'

'How do you know all this?'

'Say . . . didn't you know I was a newspaper man?' He stopped at the corner of the street. The street lamp lit up his rough face. He regarded Donald kindly, quizzically. 'This is where I get off,' he said. 'Good night.'

Donald put up his coat collar and walked on. Though the night was not cold, he was shivering.

PART II

THE FIGHTER

CHAPTER ONE

I

BABA was singing the Mad Scene.

The last brilliant cadenza was accomplished, the last note rang through the house, strong and shrill, inhuman as a piccolo. Silence. And then, like the breaking of a vast wave, that thunders on, raises its towering crest, thunders again with a deep bass roar, giving tongue to a thousand minor voices, applause shook the theatre. It seemed, indeed, like a cataract that roared from roof to stalls, the whole theatre was deluged with the uproar, and even had there been any dissentient voices, they would have been swept along with the irresistible flood of acclamation.

But there were no dissentient voices. Baba had behaved exactly as the British public considered she should behave, by which we mean that she had delivered, in the right place and at the right moment, a quantity of exceedingly loud, high, clear notes. She had also given the impression that, had she desired, she could deliver, at a moment's notice, an equal quantity of even louder, higher, and clearer notes. This, the British public felt, was exactly as it should be. Women in the stalls, who were so musical that they thought and proclaimed that, 'There's nothing like the human voice, is there?'

nudged each other when Baba accomplished a particularly successful B flat. When she touched high D several young men from White's Club were visibly moved, and felt towards her the same sort of affection that they were accustomed to bestow upon some particularly energetic horse who surmounted an unusual obstacle during the Grand National. And even the few intelligent ones were held in a sort of horrified fascination that any human being could emit such awe-inspiring sounds with so stolid an expression. 'She's like a Robot that's swallowed a canary,' hissed old Mrs. Legrange, for whom Patti had often sung, free of charge, in the old days. Mrs. Legrange was immediately 'Ssh'd' by an outraged Cabinet Minister, who had not had such an æsthetic treat since his boy sang, 'Oh, for the wings of a do-hove ' in Eton chapel.

Pauline was standing in the shadow of the corridor outside Irela's box. She felt sick at heart. This was the moment above all others that she had dreaded. It would not be true to say that she had prayed for Baba's failure – Baba was a nice little thing, and she wished her no harm. But this – this overwhelming success was unbearable. Stepping forward a little, and looking over the balcony, she could see Baba, far below, bowing and smirking, this way and that. She could not bow very far because she was too fat, but she bounced about like a little ball, kissing a podgy hand, and occasionally tossing back a wisp of her enormous, marmalade-coloured wig.

Pauline shrank back into the shadow. She must return to Irela at once. She must not desert her at this moment. Yet – it was terribly hard. What should she say? Should she pretend that it was not a triumph . . . that it was just a nice, friendly little welcome to a foreign soprano who had sung quite competently? She paused with her hand on the door of the box, irresolute. Then she opened the door half-way. What she saw seemed to chase away all her fears.

Irela was leaning right out of her box, shouting, 'Brava, brava!' There had been a slight lull in the applause, but now the famous voice, the little boy's voice, echoed out, floating like a silver bubble on the surface of the turbulent flood of sound. Baba turned and kissed her hand. Irela kissed her hand in return. Then the applause was more ferocious than ever. 'The star that was setting paying tribute to the star that was rising,' people whispered. It was really too touching, they thought, the old woman's generous tribute to that sweet, fat little thing, and mothers congratulated themselves that they had dragged their unwilling sons and daughters to this occasion, about which they would be able to tell their grandchildren, if they ever had any, which seemed doubtful, in the way the world was going, and how music did make one's mind wander, and ah! there was Irela throwing a bunch of roses to Baba, and how lucky that they just missed hitting her in the eye, and now the applause was quite deafening. But it was stopping at last, and they would go on. Perhaps she would sing higher than ever now!

When Irela threw the bouquet to Baba, Pauline had moved forward a little, longing to see the effect on the audience. Then she retreated again, for fear that she herself would be seen and spoil the picture. As soon as the applause died down, Irela, with a final gay smile, stepped back into the box. She was now out of everybody's sight. She turned towards Pauline. She did not see her.

Her face was the face of a murderess.

It was the face of a tortured murderess. Her forehead was twisted as with an intolerable pain, her eyes were glazed with hatred, her upper lip fantastically was drawn back. And she was shaking with silent laughter! That was the most terrible thing of all. She stared straight in front of her, at the wall, and shook with this fearful, devilish laughter. Her bare shoulders quivered, the wrinkles of her bosom were contorted, her neck throbbed. It was too much for Pauline. She turned away and shut the door, taking a little time about it, so that Irela might have time to control herself.

When she turned again Irela was sitting on her seat. She had her hand up to her face, as though she did not wish to be seen. She motioned Pauline to the front seat. As Pauline sat down she noticed that Irela was still laughing. Their eyes met. In a sort of frenzied self-defence Irela whispered, 'That wig . . . that wig!' She pointed to Baba. Pauline twisted her mouth to a smile.

'That wig!' It was all that Irela said. It was both pathetic and horrible. Soon the laughter ceased.

When the final curtain fell, Irela sat very white and still in the shadow of the box. Then people began to come in, and she rose and said, 'Yes, Baba had been marvellous,' smiled graciously and proclaimed herself 'delighted – delighted,' until the stalls had almost emptied and the last visitor had left them.

She turned to Pauline. She looked utterly tired . . . there were white patches on her cheeks . . . her eyelids drooped pitifully.

'I can't go to the party,' she whispered. 'I can't.'

'But, darling . . .' Pauline paused. Irela had moved into the light now, and it was very evident that she could not go, that she should be put to bed as soon as possible.

But how? They were all waiting for her. She was the guest of honour. She was expected to make a speech. It would cause terrible ill-feeling among the Italians if she chucked them.

'Don't you think you could just go for a minute,' she said.

'I couldn't . . . I couldn't.' Even now she was supporting herself on the arm of her chair.

This was dreadful. Not only was Pauline agitated on Irela's behalf, but on her own. Donald was waiting for her outside. How could she possibly desert Irela now? Everything seemed to conspire against her. For the moment, however, she put Donald from her thoughts. This crisis must be settled first.

'I can see you're tired.' She put her young hand on Irela's arm. 'But honestly I think you should just go yourself and tell them. . . . I would go, of course. There's nothing I wouldn't do . . . but it wouldn't be the same if I went.

Irela suddenly clutched her arm. 'Will you come with me, if I go, and then take me straight home?'

Pauline looked away. Misery descended upon her. That this should happen, now . . . it was too cruel. Donald was waiting. He had ordered supper. He had hired a car. He had told her that he was going to spend a week's savings on their first evening together. She had her little birthday-present for him in her pocket. Oh, it was too much to bear! She turned to Irela and there were tears in her eyes. She said:

'I *had* promised . . .' Then she could not go on. No, she could not. It was not that she was moved by Irela's grief, or her loneliness, nor afraid of the possibility of her anger. It was simply that there was a royalty about Irela, even in this moment of her defeat, which made it impossible to run counter to her wishes.

'That young man?'

'I'd promised . . .'

'You can put him off, darling.'

Irela said it wearily, but calmly – as if there were no question about it . . . could be none. Pauline was almost frightened as she realized the power this strange, drooping old woman had over her . . . over everybody. Irela was taking from her the one chance

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of great happiness that she had ever had . . . taking it from her merely because she was tired and did not want to go home alone. Hot tears of resentment blinded her, but they were not of resentment against Irela, but against this Fate which had somehow dealt her so cruel a blow.

She made a last despairing effort. She said, 'I'm afraid it'll be very difficult. You see . . .' But Irela was not even listening to her. She was already outside the door, on her way to make her excuses to Baba.

II

They were holding high revel in Baba's dressing-room. It was crowded with the Spanish fraternity, most of them rather drunk, shouting, laughing, waving bottles and little Spanish flags. Piccolo was standing in the centre of the room calling 'Viva, viva!' Sovino was prowling round, pale and excited, never taking his eyes off Baba. She herself bounced from one friend to another, calling endearments in her high shrill voice, utterly entranced, like a child at her own birthday party. Several odd-looking female relations, in rusty black, stood at the side, chattering and gulping champagne. Over the whole noisy, brightly coloured gang brooded Kober, his arms folded, watching, a thin smile on his face.

Then the door opened and Irela came in. There was a moment's pause . . . a quick hush. Pauline, standing behind her, saw the whole scene reflected in the multiple mirrors . . . there was a sense that time stood still. There was Piccolo, fixed and immobile, with his little flag over his hand. There was Baba, like a huge mechanical doll that had suddenly run down. And the strange relations in black, like petrified crows. And Kober . . . ah! Kober, he never moved, never ceased smiling, never winked an eye.

It was then that Irela was so superb. For all her vitality seemed to surge back to her in a flood, she lifted her head, stretched out her arms, stepped forward and cried, 'My child, you are the greatest Lucia . . .' and burst into highly artificial tears.

It was a master stroke. Baba cried, 'No, no! You, you more great, much more great!' Everybody crowded round, some shouted 'No,' others shouted 'Yes.' How long the shouting and confusion would have lasted it is difficult to say, had not Kober, at this moment, come out of his corner, still smiling, pushed his way through, laid his palsied hand on Irela's, and said, with a silky sneer, 'I can imagine how delighted *you* must be feeling to-night!'

Irela stiffened and drew her hand away. There was fear in her eyes. It was extraordinary to see such terror on the face of one who was usually so dauntless. 'Yes, yes,' she said, looking away from him. And then she turned, and was apologizing to Baba, and saying how tired she was, and would Baba ever forgive her if she did not come to the party? And Baba saying how desolated she was, but of course she understood. Nobody seemed to mind very much. Indeed, they appeared to have forgotten Irela. It was as though, already, she had been put on a shelf. Before she had even left the room the revelry was at its height again.

'Come straight home when you have seen him,' said Irela to Pauline. 'I will find my way to the car.'

She turned and walked down the corridor. Her head was held high, but her feet stumbled.

III

Pauline found him where they had planned, standing in the doorway, the big Daimler waiting at the kerb. He looked radiantly handsome and fiercely happy.

She ran to his arms, she could not tell him . . . not for a moment . . . she must have just these few seconds of happiness.

'Oh, honey! Oh, honey!' He drew her close to him. A fleeting incongruous wonder passed through her mind at their mutual, complete denial of the existence of other people. Here she was, in a crowded street, with a chauffeur watching, and she was behaving as though they were alone in the world. What was he saying? 'I couldn't have waited another minute. I've got it all set. We've got the swellest table, we're going to have oysters and the champagne's on ice, and afterwards we can drive till dawn, if you want to, and think we're millionaires, and . . . Oh, gee, I love you like hell.' He lifted her face to his. Suddenly he noticed. 'Say, you're crying.'

'I can't come, Don. I can't come!'

She felt his arms relax, saw the glow vanish from his face.

'What's that?'

'I can't come.'

'Why not?'

'It's Irela. She's ill.'

He turned away. He was very angry. Yes . . . angry with Pauline. He kicked his toe impatiently against the wall. There were tears in his eyes.

'Say,' he growled, 'I'm getting to think you love that old woman a darn sight more than you love me.'

'Oh, Don!' She was white with grief. But how could she explain? How could she show him this extraordinary hypnotic power which Irela exercised over her, over everybody? How could she explain what had happened to-night?

He said impatiently, 'She was at the show to-night? Wasn't she?'

'Yes. But . . .'

'But what? She can't be exactly dying if she can go to a show?'

'It was the opera that brought it on,' Pauline began to explain. 'You see . . .'

'Oh, I *see*! Little Miss Baba sang better than she did, did she? And so she pretends to be sick, doesn't go to the party because she won't play second fiddle. And just because she's so damned selfish she says you've got to go home and keep her company and tell her how marvellous she is. Hell! What do you think you are, anyway? A slave?'

Pauline *did* think she was a slave. She knew very clearly she was a slave. She also knew that she was the most miserable girl in the world.

'Well?' he repeated.

'I can't explain, Don. It's been a terrible night for Irela. . . .'

'Thank God for that!'

'You mustn't say that . . . she . . . the applause was much greater than she got. . . . She feels it bitterly. . . . She . . . she's all alone. . . . She . . .'

'She! She! She!' he barked. 'Is it always going to be "*she*"? And who else is going to be alone, I'd like to know? I'll have a fine time, drinking a bottle of champagne by myself in a night club, won't I?' He glared at her, saw the utter misery in her face, checked himself. 'I'm sorry, Pauline. It isn't that I mind that . . . or the car . . . or anything. . . .It's just that I do so terribly want to have you with me to-night. Couldn't you come just for an hour?'

'I can't!' she cried desperately. She could not bear to hear the pleading in his voice. 'I can't. You don't understand. She's ill. I've got to go. I'd give anything . . . anything in the world. But you don't understand. . . .'

He was not listening to her. He had turned away suddenly. An excited throng of people pushed by them. There was laughter and a great deal of jostling, so that they had to step back in the doorway. Pauline looked up. As she did so, there was a loud cheer, and a brightly lighted car swept by. In it sat Irela, a rich gold cloak around her, a sheaf of lilies in her hand, bowing with a changeless smile to the crowds around her.

Swept by, and was gone. The crowds drifted away. Pauline did not dare to speak. Then he said coldly:

'She didn't look so ill then, did she?'

She felt a quick surge of anger. Why should he speak to her like that? Why should she be blamed for doing the right thing? Why should this damnable Fate always come between her and happiness, and why should things always happen that she was put in the wrong?

'It's not fair . . . it's not fair!' she cried. 'You don't understand.'

'I don't.'

'I can't help myself. I've got to go back. You can't judge by what you saw then. She was acting . . . keeping up appearances . . . she wasn't smiling really . . . it was all show.'

'She!'

She made a tremendous effort to keep calm. 'Don,' she said quietly, 'if you speak to me like that, it's over. I'm heart-broken about this evening. But . . .'

She could say no more. Her courage seemed to have left her. Timidly she fumbled in her bag. Something had to be done, or she would scream, and the only thing that immediately occurred to her was to powder her nose. As she felt in her bag, her fingers came in contact with a little package covered in tissue paper. Donald's present! For a moment she hated it, wanted to throw it away. Then impulsively she put it in his hand.

'What's this?' he asked gruffly.

She shook her head. She could not trust herself to speak. She only stared at him.

He undid it. The little match-box glistened in the lamplight. With fingers that trembled slightly he turned it over, and read the inscription: 'Donald from Pauline. March 26th.' Then slowly, strongly, he put his arms round her.

Neither of them spoke. The traffic roared by them, a few feet away, there was the perpetual scurry of footsteps, now and then an arm brushed them, so that they swayed slightly. But they did not speak.

Then he put his hand very gently under her chin and tilted her face to his. 'You've got me beat, honey,' he said. 'I apologize.' Then he frowned. 'But listen – you've never got to chuck me again, not for the Queen of England. And what's more, you're just going to come for a drive in this car . . . only ten minutes . . . but somehow it's rather too public here to kiss you, as you don't deserve to be kissed!'

IV

She lay back in his arms. The car curved, like some sleek, purring animal, through the dark streets that lie between Covent Garden and the Strand. Oh, this was a magic car . . . and a magic hour! They swam into the lights that still blazed from the Gaiety Theatre. . . . 'Not too fast,' cried Donald through the window, and now they were gliding peacefully past the Gothic mystery of the law courts. High, high above them drifted the buildings. She looked up and saw Donald's face, and behind through the glass, the cluttered kaleidoscope of chimneys and roofs, and behind that, the wise cockney face of the moon. She kissed him – a kiss that lasted from the Temple to the Embankment.

As they glided down the Embankment – oh, how short that interminable thoroughfare seemed to-night – she sensed a Venetian magic over the wintry Thames. The faint river mist veiled the vulgarity of the distant sky signs, turning them from crude emblems of commerce to enchanted decorations. The pale letters danced, like fluttering fingers, over the tumbled roofs, drew faint, fiery fingers across the grey waters, lit to quickly fading silver the ramshackle design of docks and sheds. So many things in the swift transit seemed beautiful. Barges ploughing seawards, with grotesque funnels that bobbed up and down the more violently as they encountered the wake of other vessels . . . they were surely steered by spirits from another world . . . spirits born of the oily waters, who had boarded them with dripping thighs and wild glances, and were sending them to destinations unknown! Black, crumpled figures that lay huddled on the benches, like skeleton leaves blown into a corner by a wanton wind, were these really humans in distress? Were they not rather tortured spirits, who had been tossed across the world by an adverse fate? Would they not soon fly away into the night, with shrill cries, like bats at the bidding of an enchantress? Strange thoroughfare of silver and black, over which the bare branches sighed and brooded, a thoroughfare so often dedicated to mourning and despair, but lit for Pauline to-night by a radiance that was not, certainly, evident to the damned ones who huddled on the benches. A radiance none the less real to her, lying so briefly in the arms of her lover.

They stopped at the coffee-stall that pitches its tent, like a poor relation, in the shadow of the Savoy. As they stepped out of the car, Pauline glanced at her watch. It was half-past twelve. She did not care.

'I feel like Cinderella,' she whispered.

He pressed her arm to his. He also remembered, just in time, to adjust his tie.

The coffee-stall was crowded. From the swinging lamp in its little roof came shafts of orange light which broke on men's faces, dividing them sharply into harsh squares and triangles, like an impressionist picture. Yet there was nothing harsh about the glances which these humble people gave them. For they saw two young people deeply in love, and they wished them well.

Back to the car. It was nearly over, the little adventure, the tiny romance which life was permitting them. Nearly over. She clung to him, frightened by something which she dare not explain.

V

Pauline let herself into the house with a latchkey. She watched Donald climb back into the car, and wave his hand. He was gone. She heard the mournful hoot of the horn as the car turned the corner. Then she closed the door.

She threw her cloak over the chair. The clock struck the quarter, making her start nervously. She caught sight of herself in the glass. How tired she looked . . . and how sad. It was absurd of her . . . there was nothing to make her sad. She loved Donald and Donald loved her . . . no one was going to come between them. . . . No one? The clock seemed to echo the word, ticking, ticking – No one? No one? No one? She shivered. She must not allow herself these ridiculous fancies. They only came to her because it was so late, and because the house was so silent.

Then, as she stood there, she realized that the house was not silent, that somewhere, upstairs was the sound of music. Who could it be? Had Irela asked people back? As the question formed itself in her mind a wave of indignation swept over her. If Irela was having a party . . . after pretending to be so overwrought . . . after insisting that she should come home to comfort her! Quickly she walked upstairs – then on the landing she paused. . . .

The door of the music room was open, and Irela sat by the fire, staring into it, and on a table in front of her was a gramophone. It was an old one that she had dragged down from the box-room. Normally she would not allow these instruments to be played in her presence – whether because she thought them inartistic, or whether because they reminded her, even dimly, of the voice which was now so rapidly deserting her, Pauline never knew. But she did know that Irela had never played a gramophone before, and the fact that she was now playing one was the clearest indication of the crisis through which she was passing. For Irela was playing her own record of the Mad Scene from *Lucia*, which she had recorded nearly fifteen years before.

Even then, she had been forty-five – just past her prime. The recording was dim and scratchy, yet filled with a wild and pulsating beauty. It vibrated with the mad, tumultuous melody. Pauline, like a ghost, moved slowly into the room and sat down. Irela looked at her, tried to smile, and then stared again, gloomily, into the fire.

The last high note echoed away. The gramophone whirred on, clicked automatically, was still. The room seemed to echo with the crazy sweetness of the song.

Then Irela spoke. Her eyes were half-closed and she rocked herself up and down, like a woman who mourns for the dead.

'It was in Paris when I first sang it,' she said. 'I was twenty-one. There was a cabal against me, and I sang to a house of deaf people . . . they literally shut their ears against me. But gradually they came round, gradually I won them. They jumped on to the stage when I finished. They had never done that at the Opéra before. The applause . . .' she waved her hand with a weary gesture. 'Baba!' She laughed softly to herself, not a bitter laugh, rather the laugh of one who has climbed to immense heights, has looked down on the futility of the world, and now watches with ironic amusement another who is making the same painful ascent. 'Baba will never be given what the world has given to me.'

'When I sang it in Russia the students took the horses out of my carriage and ran me through Petersburg. The city was deep in snow and the moon was very bright. When they took me back to my hotel they had brought red roses for me to walk on. . . . So many roses that they covered the snow all over the pavement. I shall never forget how lovely the roses looked . . . they were blood-red in the snow, and the moon shone on them. . . .'

'In Paris it was spring when I sang it, and I was in love. I sang for one man. I believe I sang more beautifully then than I have ever done. I wonder? He is dead now. I am glad he is dead, because I would not like him to hear me now. The rest – they don't matter. The critics know I still sing better than anyone in the world. The audiences are sorry I don't give them so many high notes, but the young ones feel they ought to hear me, just to tell their children they *have* heard me, and the old ones remember . . . ah, yes, they remember . . . and I can still make that memory live again. . . . But I would not have let *him* hear me . . . if he were alive. I would never sing again. . . .'

The tears were rolling down her cheeks, but she still rocked herself backwards and forwards. Pauline tried to speak, but what was there to say . . . what was there to say?

'I have had a wonderful life, Pauline. I have had power . . . such power!' She threw back her head, and the firelight, flickering on the wet cheeks, made them glisten strangely. 'I could commit any sin, and be forgiven after a single song. It was like magic, in the old days, like magic. You don't know, you will never know, you are too young; but some day you may meet a man who will tell you . . . not yet, but some day. It was like magic, and it is difficult when one loses the spell.' She lowered her head. Clumsily she wiped the tears away with the back of her hand.

She rose to her feet. Speaking with her back to Pauline she said, 'Did you see your young man?'

'Yes.'

Very slowly, as if it were an immense effort to her, Irela said, 'I am sorry I . . . I spoiled your evening.'

'It doesn't matter.' Oh, what mattered, any more, in this house of intolerable grief?

'Yes, it does. It was selfish of me. It shall never happen again. You'll see him soon, very soon.' She came back to Pauline, and put her arms round her. No longer did she speak in a sad monotone . . . she cried, harshly, with an echo of fierce pain, 'Forgive me . . . forgive me . . . you're all I have in the world. . . .'

She clung to Pauline, who stood, white and still, and the firelight flickered about them.

CHAPTER TWO

I

But on the following day Irela's promise that Pauline should see Donald again 'very soon,' her vow that she would cease to be selfish, and her strange, tortured confession of her own fading powers were all forgotten. When Pauline came down to breakfast she found Irela in one of the worst tempers she had ever seen. Moreover, it was not the temper of a sick woman, for she seemed completely recovered from her fatigue. She looked ten years younger, and had it not been for the angry red flush on her cheekbones, she would have looked almost attractive.

She had been reading Baba's press notices, and they were very good indeed – far *too* good. All around her on the floor were violently crumpled newspapers (Irela could never read a newspaper without making it look as if it had been worried by a puppy) and she had yet to find a single bad notice. It was utterly mortifying.

'These critics have lost their heads . . . mad, they are . . . anybody would think . . .' The rest was lost in a rustle of paper as she discovered a notice she had not read.

Pauline helped herself to some coffee and said nothing.

'The only thing they *haven't* said,' snorted Irela, 'is that she's a second Irela! If they printed that, I'd go to law about it. Where's the *Morning Star*?'

Pauline saw it by her side. She was just going to hand it to Irela when she saw, on the front page, a full-column story headed:

A NEW IRELA

BABA LETOILE'S TRIUMPH

She hastily put her hand over the paper. Irela would have to see it sooner or later, but she infinitely preferred her to see it after breakfast. She stood up, still covering it with her hand and looked over the littered table.

'It doesn't seem to be here,' she said.

'It must be here. I ordered them all.' She stared coldly at Pauline's hand. 'Darling,' she snapped. 'You seem to be asleep. You've got your hand on it.'

Reluctantly Pauline gave it to her.

'*What?*' screamed Irela, as soon as she saw the notice. And again, 'What?'

'What is it?'

'For God's sake don't talk to me!'

Very well, thought Pauline, for God's sake I *won't* talk to you. If Irela was going to speak like that to her, she could hardly expect to be answered. She glanced across the table. Irela was hidden behind the newspaper which was already bundled into the shape of a balloon. Only her hands and her legs were visible. Her hands, with the heavy diamond rings, were curved like claws. Her legs were crossed, and showed fat, stockinged knees. She was wearing her Russian boots and her right foot beat an impatient tattoo on the table-leg.

'Listen to this,' she cried. '*Signora Letoile's voice has all the quality of the old Irela, the Irela who, more years ago than it would be discreet to recollect, enraptured Covent Garden. The same Irela timbre, the same astonishing flexibility. The world of music may congratulate itself that a new Queen has risen, more than worthy to seize the sceptre of Song, when Madame Irela chooses to relinquish it.*'

She read this out with considerable difficulty, so breathless with anger was she. When she had finished, she cried:

'The old Irela. *Old* Irela. That's pretty, isn't it? And "more years than it would be discreet to recollect!" And then talking of the Irela timbre. The man doesn't know what timbre is! And the same astonishing flexibility . . . when she hasn't got a trill. She – has – not – got – a – trill!' And each word she emphasized by banging her fist on the table.

'Please . . . please you'll upset something. . . .'

'I don't care what I upset,' roared Irela. 'SHE HAS NOT GOT A TRILL. How dare they talk about her astonishing flexibility? It isn't *her* fault that she hasn't got a trill, any more than it's her fault that she hasn't got a tail, though, by the way she eats, I shouldn't be surprised if she grew one. But you either are born with a trill or you aren't. I was born with a perfect one. I've had it photographed on the audiometer – I'll show you – oh, no, what does it matter?' She had risen, but she sat down again.

'Then look at this: "*When* Madame Irela chooses to relinquish the sceptre of Song!" As though I were standing in her way. Why, nobody would have ever heard of the wretched woman if I hadn't dragged her from her own filthy country, and I wouldn't have done that if it hadn't been for Kober. Kober!' At the mention of his name a light of fanaticism came into her eyes. 'It's Kober's doing, that notice. Mark my words. I shouldn't be surprised if he'd written it himself. And in my opinion it's libellous. I'll get Hackerston's advice.'

She rushed to the telephone. Almost before she had taken up the receiver she was cursing the operator for neglecting her. She jigged this way and that in her Russian boots, and when she eventually got hold of Hackerston she poured out such a profusion of abuse that he said the only thing for him to do was to come round to see her, to which she agreed.

'I shall be in my room,' she snapped to Pauline. 'Tell James to send him straight up when he arrives.'

II

Hackertson arrived in half an hour. He was a gaunt, lanky Scotsman of nearly seventy, but his hair still kept traces of its original red, and there was a twinkle in his eye, belying the melancholy cast of his features. He bowed slowly to Pauline and went straight upstairs to Irela.

Barely twenty minutes later they both came down again. Pauline, who had been listening breathlessly for the sound of smashed vases or falling chairs, was amazed at the contrast which Irela presented. She was wreathed in smiles, she was coquettish, even girlish in an elephantine way.

'Get me the Savoy on the telephone and ask for Baba,' she cried to Pauline. As Pauline waited for the number, Irela trotted round the room, talking baby talk, sliding her feet like a small boy, taking up a new bibelot and saying, 'Isn't he *twee*?' Or, 'Isn't it *boot*iful?'

The number came through. Irela snatched the telephone, and Pauline listened to this astonishing conversation.

'Baba – *darling*! I'm very *jell*!' (A high laugh, quickly followed by a frown, and an aside, 'The damned fool doesn't understand a word of English.') Then again in a crooning voice . . . 'Very *jealous*, darling. Ma el gusto es mio . . . lovely notices. My dear, I can't tell you how happy I am! Too delighted.' (Another high laugh). 'Oh, but you deserve every word of it. And I was so *flattered* when they compared you with little *me*! Now listen, darling, there are one or two tiny things. I wonder if I could tell you – little hints about your rôles – I'm an old woman and perhaps I might be able to help – you know, my method – and then your clothes – would you? That's too sweet of you. Very well then, at the dress rehearsal to-morrow afternoon. Good-bye!'

Irela put down the telephone and said, 'She was still in bed. With Sovino, I suppose!' Then she waltzed round the room, and in her baby voice said, 'What *fun*!' Then she went to the door and said, 'Hacky darling, if you've got your car you can drive me down to the city. I shan't be ten minutes. Pauline's got to stay at home to do some work.'

She left them together.

Wide-eyed, Pauline said, 'How on earth did you do it?'

'Just a little moral support!' His eyes were twinkling more than ever.

'No, but please tell me. . . .'

'Well, it's like this.' He leant against the mantlepiece and regarded her kindly. 'You've got to realize two things about Irela. Firstly that she's an artist. Secondly that she's a realist.'

'Well?'

'The two work together in this case. Because Irela's a realist, she admits that Baba's a tremendous success. She mayn't like it, she mayn't think it's justified, but the fact remains, and since it's a fact, Irela faces it.'

'We'll go back to that in a minute. But first consider the artist side of it. Baba isn't an artist. She's not a musician, she can't act, and she doesn't know how to dress. But she's in Irela's company. And as such Irela feels responsible for her. She's not going to have her name associated by the few people whose opinion she really respects with anything that's in bad taste – with that wig in the second act of *Lucia*, for example. Therefore she's going to take Baba in hand.'

'Take Baba in hand?' repeated Pauline, in great astonishment.

'Certainly. Didn't you hear her mention her "method" and her "clothes"?'

'But it would lead to the most appalling rows.'

'Quite.' He twinkled at her. Then he continued. 'Now about Irela being a realist. Irela's got a lot of money in this opera season. A great deal. As a matter of fact, she can't lose a penny, because I drew up the contract for her. Actually she'll make a great deal. 'But . . .' and here he winked at her, 'she's never averse to making a little bit more.'

'How?'

'By putting Baba under contract to her for five years.'

'Do you mean to say . . .?'

'That's what she just suggested to me upstairs. I think it's a very good idea. If we can get the right contract. The only reason I mentioned it to you was to remind you that you are the niece of a very remarkable woman. An ordinary *prima donna*, in her position, would be inconsolable. Well, perhaps she is, but she won't let the public see that. She'll cash in while the cashing's good. And yet, all the time, it isn't only money she'll be thinking of. She'll be thinking of that wig!'

Any further confidences were interrupted by the arrival of Irela, looking very odd and extremely untidy in a new Russian toque, and a short coat of unborn lamb, a costume which made her look like a curious mixture between a Cossack and a lady-in-waiting to her late Majesty Queen Alexandra.

III

Baba Letoile was lying in her bedroom at the Savoy Hotel when Irela rang her up, and, as Irela had conjectured, Sovino was at her side. Suspecting, unjustly, that she was receiving a communication from some lover, he sat up in bed, ran his hands through his hair and glared at her, as though wishing to snatch the telephone from her hands. Then, when he heard Irela's voice, he shrugged his shoulders, blew out his lips, and sank back on the pillow. He did not want to hear any more from *that* old fish!

Baba, with a slightly puzzled expression, bounced up and down in the bed, trying to understand what Irela was talking about. Had Toulouse-Lautrec been present on this occasion he might have created, from this scene, a very satisfying cartoon, – the lover, thin, sullen and relaxed in his pale yellow pyjamas, Baba herself, all curves and pouts and dimples, and, scattered about the room, on every chair, cupboard, shelf and ledge, dolls. French dolls dressed as Pierrots, with tired linen faces and soiled, silken lips, German dolls, starched and erect, flounced with garments of cherry-coloured cotton, English dolls, waxen, pink and blonde, Italian dolls that seemed to smoulder beneath their draperies of purple brocade. Baba could not live without her dolls. They were her 'cheeldren,' she said. They were little limited editions of herself. For she had dramatized her life to correspond with the singing toy in the second act of the *Tales of Hoffmann*. She *was* a doll.

It was a peculiarly suitable rôle for her, because she could hardly have fulfilled any part which required a more acute intelligence. For what does a doll do when it is pinched? It squeaks. And what did Baba do when (as was not seldom) she was pinched – or embraced? She squeaked. A most saccharine, melodious squeak, which demoralized the elevator boy outside, standing, pale and tense, in peach-coloured velvet, by the lift.

She was squeaking a great deal now, so much, indeed, that Sovino, who had passed a restless night (not entirely without his complaisance), sat up once again, despairing of repose, and snarled, 'What is it?'

After a few more squeaks, Baba put down the telephone. They spoke in Spanish, of course, and to this effect :

'She wants to teach me.'

'Teach you what?'

'To sing.' She regarded him with amiable, puzzled eyes.

'*What?*' Sovino leapt out of bed, and stood over her, a yellow flame of indignation.

Baba explained as well as she could. She had not understood half that Irela had said, but at least she had heard the word 'hints,' and 'my method' and 'clothes.' She translated these words to her husband.

Sovino nearly jumped out of the window with rage. He paced the room, muttering imprecations. Then, he stood before her, neck craned forward, teeth closed, hands held almost horizontally behind him with fists clenched, and hissed :

'So *she* is to teach you to sing *Lucia* – yes? To sing it like an English governess who cannot have babies – yes? Like an English lady, with a little false front instead of your wig – yes? And she is to teach you to sing *Sonnambula* – too – and make you look as though, if you *did* walk in your sleep, you would walk into the spare bedroom – yes? And she is to make a great English lady of you – yes? And teach you to sing "Omesweetome" to the Ouse of Parliament – yes?'

There was a great deal more of this. Baba gravely pondered all he said, quite unmoved. Then she said, 'You are cold. I am cold. Come to bed.'

The page boy outside, still standing pale and tense in peach-coloured velvet, left his job that day and spent all his savings on a ticket to Paris, where – for all we know – he may be to this day.

IV

Irela never did things by halves. Having decided that Baba was to become her protégée she spent the whole of the time before the dress rehearsal in making feverish preparations for her tuition. In spite of her affairs and the ramifications of her business she had always a great deal of time on her hands, and being entirely devoid of intellectual resources, she welcomed this opportunity for diversion.

Tremlowe was the first to suffer from this new enterprise. Irela returned in the afternoon from the city, where she had spent an agreeable morning working out the terms of the contract which she proposed for Baba, and rang the bell again and again. It was the hour when Tremlowe availed herself of a brief nap, and she was a little late in appearing. 'Damn you, Tremlowe, you're always late. If you weren't so plain I'd accuse you of having a lover!' This observation informed Tremlowe that 'her ladyship' was in a good humour. At least she thought so then. Half an hour later she realized her mistake. For Irela had demanded, at a moment's notice, all the old costumes which she used to wear in *Lucia*, *Il Barbiere* and *Sonnambula*, and since they were not instantly forthcoming she worked herself up into a tantrum which carried her backwards and forwards to the attic, exploding all the way up and down the stairs.

Pauline thought it best to go up and help the old woman. She found her bending tearfully over an immense trunk, marked with a single word, IRELA, in bright scarlet. There was something very touching in the monologue which she delivered, as she delved among satins and tissue paper, amid a smell of moth balls.

'Thirty years I've served 'er ladyship,' she said, understood half that Irela had said, but at least she had heard the word 'hints,' and 'my method' and 'clothes.' She translated these words to her husband.

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'Thirty years I've served 'er ladyship,' she said, 'and each of the thirty I've swore would be the last. 'Ow anybody stands it, I don't know. You'd think a lady would 'ave more consideration for a dog. There's nearly thirty hoperas represented in the dresses that lie in these trunks, and as far as the normal eye can see, there's not much difference in any of 'em. They're all like nightgowns, if you asks me, except Salome, which 'er ladyship never sang, an' a good thing too, considering it's all beads, with 'er figure. And she never would get a separate box for each opera – said she couldn't afford it – and so they all 'as to be lumped in together. And 'ow am I to know whether this is *Lucia* or the *Barber* or *Palliarchi* or what not?' She held out a long green dress and regarded it mournfully. Then her eye lit up. 'No,' she said, a little more cheerfully, 'that's *Rigoletto*. That's what that is. I remember it because it was one of 'er ladyship's most sensational rôles.' And then the flood of self-pity took a different turn, and swelled, illogically, into praise at the remembered glories which shone round Irela when she wore that dress.

'Loyalty . . .' thought Pauline, 'what a strange thing loyalty is!' And she told herself that there must be some very wonderful quality in Irela which could prompt such devotion, and keep it alive through all these years.

The dresses were identified at last and carried downstairs, together with their accompanying wigs, shoes, stockings, sets of jewellery, staves, daggers, and the like. By the time that they had all been assembled, the music room looked like a jumble sale. But Irela was enchanted. She bustled from dress to dress, saying that Baba would look 'like hell' in this, 'not so bad' in that, 'pretty good in this – I was as fat as a pig when I sang *Il Barbiere*.' Around each dress she wove a reminiscence – how King Edward, then Prince of Wales – had stepped on her train when she wore the white satin at Covent Garden – see, there was the mark of the mending to this day; how Alfred de Rothschild had pinned a diamond pendant on the bosom of her dress in the second act of *La Tosca* – why, here was the mark; how she never liked *La Tosca* – 'The critics all said my voice was too delicate for it – they said it was like a bull in a china shop; no, that can't be right – like Dresden china and a bull; no, that's not it either. But they said charming things. . . .'

With such activities the time went very quickly. Almost before she had time to realize it, Pauline was standing, on the following afternoon, in Baba's dressing-room, after the dress rehearsal of *Il Barbiere*.

V

It began with the wig. There they all were, with Baba standing up in the middle of the room in her *Barbiere* costume, like a rather worried child, Irela posing in front of her, Tremlowe fluttering in the background and Pauline watching from the shadows.

It was certainly Irela's moment. As soon as Baba had arrived panting from the wings Irela had snatched her wig from her head – for this rôle Baba affected an affair of corkscrew curls and horrible sleekness – and held it up as though it were a scalp torn from some unusually dangerous enemy.

'My weeg, my weeg,' squeaked Baba, her eyelids fluttering up and down in excitement. She gazed wide-eyed at Irela, at Tremlowe, at Pauline, like a large and amiable animal about to be slaughtered, but in none of these ladies did she find consolation. Nor could she frame any adequate protest. Her mind was full of fiery Spanish adjectives, but when she tried to translate them they all seemed to turn automatically into the single word 'bloody,' and try as she would she could not say that word to this fierce masculine woman who was at this moment waving her precious wig in her face. So all she said was:

'My weeg.'

And Irela, with charming mockery, said:

'Yes, your weeg,' and threw it into the arms of Tremlowe, who dropped it on the floor as though it were some immense and poisonous insect.

'And now, your face,' cried the indefatigable Irela. Already she had the cold cream pot in her hand, and already she was dipping into it, slapping dabs of chilly white on to Baba's soft but outraged cheeks. Nobody observing her at that moment could have told whether she was acting from love or hate. Irela could not have told you herself. For, as Hackerston had observed, she was both realist and artist.

Breathlessly, as these operations were proceeding, she changed: 'You can't *possibly* put all that rouge on your chin. *Darling!* It's too ridiculous. With your face you must emphasize the high spots – I'm *so* sorry if that went in your eye – you must use wet white on your neck too, my angel, you see, it's such a nice, plump little neck, isn't it?'

Her old, excited, malicious eyes met Baba's, which smouldered as with summer lightning.

Yet the comedy proceeded. Baba was slapped, painted, turned about. White satins and yellow satins were hung around her. Fierce cosmetics stung her cheeks. Over her little, hot, round head wigs were crushed, until the world seemed for her a globe of tangled, whirling hair. The air was dizzy with 'darlings' and 'dearests,' and Pauline, standing ever in the shadows, wondered why Irela was doing these things? Why? Futile question. Irela was doing them because she had nothing better to do. Which is the fitting explanation for all human actions – for all crimes, for all comedies, and for all crusades.

After an hour of this sport, Baba began to feel a little battered. She was a stupid little Spanish woman, with a brain like a piece of macaroni, *i.e.* soft, pliable, with a hole in the middle. But she was at least human. She was also very tired. And so when Irela, having dressed her up to her heart's content, sat down at the piano and, with extraordinary arrogance, proclaimed that she was about to give her a singing lesson, Baba began to lose her temper. Somewhere in her funny little head a flame began to smoulder.

She was amiable – oh yes – nobody could be more amiable – but there were limits. She did not quite realize what was happening, but she knew that she had been standing on her feet for five weary hours, that she was longing to lie down and eat a pound of caramels that were concealed behind the curtain, and that this tiresome old woman was, for some mysterious and maddening reason, standing in the way of these desires. And so it was with a very bad grace that she listened to Irela as she sat down at the piano and babbled a lot of tiresome English things about her 'method' and 'registers,' and 'diet,' and this and that and the other. What did Baba care about method or registers or diet? She sang as the birds sang – lived as the birds lived, free, flying from lover to lover. Ate also as the birds ate – and anybody who has observed the common thrush, toying with the common worm in springtime, will realize the significance of this observation.

'Come here, darling,' cried Irela from the piano.

Sulkily Baba went there.

'Now sing a scale,' said Irela, in the voice of a schoolmistress ordering a child to tell her what Moses did to Esau – or whatever schoolmistresses do order children to tell them.

'I very tired,' pouted Baba. And indeed she was tired. She had every right, moral and immoral, to be tired.

'Tired!' Irela laughed with a peculiarly irritating complacency. 'What nonsense, at your age. *I'm* not tired. Why should you be?'

'You 'ave not just sung *Il Barbiere*,' complained Baba.

'Perhaps not. But even if I had, I shouldn't be tired. I could sing *Il Barbiere* and stand on my head for an hour afterwards when I was your age.'

'Yes?' said Baba, regarding her with grave distrust. 'Why you stand on your head?'

'Sweet child!' Irela laughed, extremely artificially. 'What delicious things she says! Now, come along, sing a scale.' She struck the chord of C major, an octave too high.

Baba regarded Irela's fingers with unsmiling eyes. 'You want top C?' she said.

'Not at once . . . *darling*' – and Irela now was growing a little red – 'just sing up the scale.'

Baba shrugged her shoulders. She might as well do it, she thought to herself. Then this boring, so terrible old Englishwoman might leave her in peace to enjoy her caramels. So she sang, to Irela's accompaniment, DO RE MI FA SOL . . .

When she had finished she stood there inert, with an extremely discouraging expression on her face. It had been a sweet sound – an uninteresting sound, it is true – but sweet enough, clear and full, with the ring of youth about it. But it did not satisfy Irela.

'You sing your top notes too loud, my precious,' she said. 'If you go on singing them like that you won't have any voice left at all by the time you're thirty-five.' (The fervour of the artist mingled, there, with the fervour of the business woman, for

Baba was already well over thirty, and Irela had not forgotten that she was thinking of signing her up for five years.) 'Also, my sweet child,' she continued, 'you *gulp* when you change your registers.'

Baba stared at her, motionless. Nobody could possibly tell what was passing in her little brain.

'Now, again,' cried Irela.

Pauline stirred uneasily in her seat. She had been watching Baba's hands. They had been behaving in the oddest manner – clasping and unclasping, then staying stiff and trembling by her sides as though she were labouring under some almost uncontrollable emotion, then moving again, and curving tensely over the table by her side, gripping its edges so tightly that the veins swelled on her fingers. She feared that some crisis was impending. And she was right. For when Irela, with a note of impatience, repeated, 'Now again,' Baba, without a word of warning, suddenly stamped her foot, closed her eyes, opened her mouth and shrieked. Shrieked long and defiantly, not on top C but on top D, a shrill, astonishing, phenomenal note, calculated to bring down any house and to split any normal throat in two. Irela sprang up in mingled alarm and horror, crying 'No, no,' but her cries fell on deaf ears, for Baba, with only an instantaneous pause to take breath, began again. And before anybody knew what was happening the door had been flung open, and Sovino had appeared, white with rage, and Baba had stopped shrieking, and they were both facing Irela, she like a fierce, teased kitten, he like a defiant mongrel, and a singular torrent of abuse was flowing across the room, in this manner:

BABA. You think I cannot sing?

SOVINO. You try to ruin her – my Baba?

BABA (*with another slight shriek*). You – *you* try to sing that note yourself!

SOVINO. Ha!

BABA. You say – top notes *pianissimo*. Eh? Why? Because you cannot take top notes. Eh?

SOVINO. Ha!

BABA. You tell me wear weeg like you. Eh? Why? Because you no hair. Ha! You are wicked woman!

SOVINO. You are devil!

BABA. I sing as I sing. You sing as you sing. You leave me alone. I leave you alone. I want not your advice, nor your weeg, nor yourself. I sing as I sing. (*One last shriek.*)

Whereupon she threw herself on Sovino's shoulders, sobbing.

Irela left the room with the same dignity that would have been shown by the Queen of Rumania if, on inspecting an Ideal Home Exhibition, she had fallen down a peculiarly unsavoury drain. She left the room with as much hauteur as a duchess who, having been informed of a happy event in the Pekinese kennel, had descended to inspect the same, only to discover that her favourite Pekinese matron had obviously been carrying on with an evidently degraded Chow. She left the room registering disgust, disdain, and a great many other things that begin with D.

It said a great deal for Irela's capacity as a business woman that, on the following day, Baba signed a contract which entitled Irela to the exclusive use of her services over a period of five years.

Irela had evidently been impressed by the top D, in more ways than one.

CHAPTER THREE

I

It was soon after Baba's first night that the Kober crisis occurred.

For a long time the situation had been growing daily more difficult. And now Irela seemed able to think of nothing else. She forgot her animosity to Baba. She paid no attention to her publicity – except when it was bad, in which case she invariably traced the sinister handiwork of Kober, who, as she assured Pauline, was working against her in the press. She was rapidly driving herself into a state of nerves which might easily lead to a nervous breakdown. She was, in fact, in much the same condition as that amazing woman, Mary Baker Eddy, who was dominated, towards the end of her life, by the conception of malicious animal magnetism, directed towards her by enemies unknown. Had Irela been a Christian Scientist she would most certainly have accused Kober of being an arch-practitioner of malicious animal magnetism, or, if we may use the pleasing abbreviation of Mrs. Eddy, M.A.M.

It was surely M.A.M., on the part of Kober, that caused her huskiness in the mornings. That she had been husky, in the mornings, for the past ten years, was not brought into consideration. 'The man is driving me insane,' she would say wildly to Pauline at breakfast, apropos of nothing. 'Listen how husky my voice is! I doubt whether I shall be able to sing to-morrow. . . .' M.A.M., too, from the same maleficent source, must have been responsible for a sudden degeneration of Mrs. McPherson's culinary powers. 'Ever since he came to dinner, that night, she's never given us a decent meal.' Even the stock market, it would appear, was not immune from his sinister influence. There was a sharp fall in American Can, in which Irela had a large holding. 'Nothing goes right now,' she lamented to Pauline. 'Nothing ever will go right till that man's out of the way.'

It was at about this time that Pauline began to fear that Irela might get herself into serious trouble by the rumours she was spreading. Kober, in order to augment his income, had been approaching certain members of the company . . . girls with good voices and a certain amount of capital . . . and had proposed to them that they should put themselves under his tuition for a year. The general arrangement was that they should pay him £500 and stay with him and his wife near Florence, where he had a villa. There was nothing in the least shady about the proposition – it had, indeed, many things to recommend it. Kober was a brilliant teacher, his wife was a charming woman, the villa was delightful, the cuisine excellent, the moral tone respectable without being aggressive.

Irela, however, when she heard what he was doing, was overcome with fury. She raged up and down the music-room, one morning, beating the air with her hands, her nostrils dilated, her eyes blazing fire.

'I'll stop him!' she cried, 'I'll stop him! Seducing young girls!'

Pauline was bewildered. 'What has he been doing?'

Irela explained. 'I'll have the White Slave Traffic people on him. Yes I will! Quick . . . we'll telephone to them now.' She indicated the telephone with an imperious gesture.

'This,' thought Pauline, 'is really a little ridiculous.' Apart from the immediate problem of who the 'White Slave Traffic people' might be, and how one looked them up in the telephone directory – whether one looked under the word 'white' or the word 'slave,' or whether, to save time, one put through a long-distance call to Geneva – she could not see that there had been anything in Irela's account to justify this panic.

She hinted as much.

'Oh – you're blind, blind!' Irela screamed. 'Don't you realize what he's doing? Stealing £500 from innocent girls, for what? To take them down to a villa, outside Florence, where they'll be absolutely in his power, alone!'

'But his wife will be there. . . .'

'How do you know she'll be there? And even if she *is* there, won't that make it worse? What sort of woman *is* his wife?'

Pauline had not the least idea. Nor, to tell the truth, had Irela. She continued quickly:

'What sort of a woman *would* she be?'

'She might be very nice,' said Pauline tactlessly.

'*What?*' Irela was now very angry indeed. 'Married to Kober – a decent woman? Really! Anybody would think that *you* were one of Kober's spies, now!' She glared at Pauline. Almost, for the moment, she believed what she had said.

Pauline did not reply.

'She's a loathsome woman, mark my words,' continued Irela. 'Moreover,' and here she held out a trembling finger on which a huge brilliant shot liquid fires, 'she probably isn't his wife at all. How do we know he's married to her?'

'If one had to see everybody's marriage certificate before one could be sure they were married,' protested Pauline. . . .

'Really, darling,' snapped Irela, 'you're sometimes so ridiculously young that it's useless to talk to you.'

Yet she continued to talk to her. She said, 'Besides, what's this precious "villa" that we hear so much about? Have you ever seen it? No! So how can you pretend that it's a villa at all?' The fact that Pauline was not 'pretending' anything about the villa had been forgotten by Irela as completely as the fact that she had not seen the villa herself. But her imagination was now in the air, and well on the wing. 'A broken-down farm! That's what it is, you'll see! Without decent sanitation. Without enough to eat. Without even enough bedrooms . . . not that *that* would greatly disturb our friend Kober. Oh – it's monstrous that he should be allowed to do this. There must be some law. Why can't we get in touch with the White Slave Traffic people?' She shot an angry glance, first at the telephone, and then at Pauline, as though expecting her to get into instant communication with the world's saviours of virtue.

'I don't know who would be the right people.'

'Then you ought to know, darling!' The 'darling,' as Irela pronounced it, sounded more like invective than endearment. 'You ought to keep a card index system. *Don't* you keep a card index?'

'Yes, I do. But not for that sort of thing.'

'If you'd had any common sense it's the first thing you'd have put in your card index, once you'd met Kober. He never meets a pretty girl he doesn't try to . . . I should have thought your own experience . . .' She glanced slyly at Pauline, and saw an expression on her face which made her change her point of attack, very abruptly.

'But it's not *that* I mind,' she resumed. 'It's the fact that he'll ruin their voices. By the time he's finished with them they won't be able to sing a note. How *dare* he pretend he knows anything about singing? He can't read a note of music. He can only vamp. He can only sit down, and wobble that hideous nose of his, and make sheep's eyes at them, and tell them a lot of lies how he'll get them engagements at the Metropolitan, how they can make their début at the Scala, how Covent Garden eats out of his hand. Even if a girl had a lovely voice, and was a musician, and was strong enough to survive a year of the sort of treatment he'd give her, he'd tie her up with so many dishonest contracts that it wouldn't matter how much money she made . . . he'd take it all. How dare he? How *dare* he?'

Pauline had nothing to say to this outburst. Irela looked at her impatiently, waiting for moral support. Since none was forthcoming, she turned her attention to a newspaper, crumpling it up angrily and staring at the first thing which met her eye. And that thing proved to be the most unfortunate thing she could possibly have seen. She emitted a shrill scream.

'Quick . . . quick!' she cried. 'Get me Millie Rockstone on the telephone! Quick!'

Pauline, who, by now, was beginning to share something of Irela's anxiety, wondered what on earth could have happened. As she turned over the pages of the telephone book, Irela read from the newspaper, in a strangled voice, 'Duchess's daughter for opera. Lady Hope Martineau's contract. The *Daily Star* understands that Lady Hope Martineau, the beautiful and talented daughter of the Duchess of Rockstone, has definitely decided to embark on an operatic career. With this end in view she has just signed a contract with Mr. Arthur Kober, artistic director of the Irela Opera Company, under the terms of which she will study with Mr. Kober for a year at his charming villa in Florence. When the tuition is completed Mr. Kober is confident that he will be able to obtain enviable engagements for Lady Hope in the principal operatic centres of the world.'

'Lady Hope has a lovely contralto voice. She is a typical English beauty – tall, blonde and keen on all outdoor . . .'

Irela tore the paper in half. 'Hell! Hell!' She stamped her foot on the floor. 'It's too much.' Her breast heaved with the violence of her emotion. 'That girl . . . one of the sweetest girls who ever lived . . . how Millie Rockstone could allow it . . . she can't know, she can't understand . . . I'll tell her . . . I'll warn her.'

'The Duchess is waiting,' said Pauline quietly.

Irela rushed to the telephone. The following dialogue took place:

IRELA. Millie . . . I've just seen about Hope.

DUCHESS. Yes. Isn't it fun!

IRELA. But darling . . . she can't . . . she mustn't . . . you don't understand.

DUCHESS. Can't hear a word, my dear. The most awful buzzing. . . .

IRELA (*shouting*). She mustn't do it. . . . He's a scoundrel.

DUCHESS (*complacently*). That's better. Who's a scoundrel, darling?

IRELA. Kober!

DUCHESS (*still complacent*). Why?

IRELA. Oh, my dear . . . he'll ruin her.

DUCHESS. Ruin her what? Her voice?

IRELA. Yes . . . yes.

DUCHESS. Then why do you have him as your artistic director?

IRELA. Oh . . . it isn't only that. . . . It's everything.

DUCHESS. Darling, you seem terribly worried. What is it?

IRELA. He's not safe.

DUCHESS. Well, for heaven's sake don't tell Hope that, or nothing will stop her.

IRELA. But you mustn't allow it. I'm in deadly earnest.

DUCHESS. How can I possibly stop it?

IRELA. It's fearful. . . . He'll ruin her. . . .

DUCHESS. I know, darling. . . . You said that before.

IRELA. Millie . . . are you there?

DUCHESS. Yes . . . quite.

IRELA. Can't you understand what I'm saying?

DUCHESS. Not very well, dear.

IRELA (*fiercely*). I tell you the man's a scoundrel. He'll ruin her voice, her reputation. . . . He'll take all her money.

DUCHESS. Darling . . . I adore Hope, but she's got very little voice, hardly any reputation, and absolutely no money.

IRELA. Then why's he doing it?

DUCHESS. He's a snob, my dear. Really, you needn't worry.

IRELA (*desperately*). Oh, please listen. . . .

DUCHESS. I *am* listening.

IRELA. Can I come to lunch? And explain?

DUCHESS. Of course. (*A slight pause.*) There's only cold mutton.

IRELA. I don't care about food. . . .

DUCHESS. I wish I could say the same. One fifteen, then. While the mutton's still cold. Good-bye, darling.

'Damned fool of a woman!' snorted Irela, as she hung up the receiver.

She went to lunch.

Lady Hope went to Florence.

II

The crisis arrived a few days later, during a rehearsal of *Othello*.

Everything seemed to be conspiring to bring things to a head. Since Irela's lunch with the Duchess of Rockstone, which had proved so unsatisfactory, her energies had doubled. She had rushed round in her car, from house to house, interviewing the parents of the girls who were reputed to have signed up with Kober, warning them of the fearful fate that lay in store. As though she were possessed by a devil, as indeed she may have been, she had spent hours at the telephone, making exhaustive inquiries into his activities. She had even attended a chorus rehearsal, and had buttonholed girls in the wings, whispering dreadful things into their ears. At first they were overawed, then delighted by the honour that she was paying them. But always, in the end, they were embarrassed by the shocking details at which she hinted, especially as most of them had not the faintest intention of connecting themselves in any way with Kober . . . did not even know him by sight.

Pauline had the dreadful ordeal, on more than one occasion, of seeing little fluffy girls giggling behind Irela's back, and pointing, with secret gestures, to their foreheads. The ordeal was made still worse because she was beginning to wonder whether the gesture might not be justified.

She was sitting in the stalls when it happened. The *Othello* rehearsal was progressing quite smoothly. The first act was over. Irela had not been singing 'in full voice.' She had merely 'hinted' the high notes, to save herself. But her phrasing had been exquisite, her movements had fitted perfectly with those of the tenor, and all seemed well.

When the first act was over she joined Pauline in the stalls, to watch Act Two, in which Desdemona does not appear until comparatively late.

Suddenly she clutched Pauline's arm and screamed.

At once there was commotion. Sovino dropped his baton and swung round. The tenor stopped in the middle of a phrase. The orchestra, after a moment's half-hearted scraping, lapsed into silence. All over the darkened stalls people stood up, staring in the direction from which the scream had come. They suspected that it must be Irela but they could not be sure. It was too dark.

Then she screamed again, and struggled to her feet. In a torrent the words poured from her, half shouted, half sobbed, while she pointed a shaking hand behind her:

'There he is! There he is! Kober! He's going to kill me! He's got a knife!'

Pauline clutched her arm – tried to comfort her – in vain.

'Take him away! Away! Out of my sight! I won't sing again . . .'

Pauline glanced back. Kober was standing about ten rows behind, an expression of puzzled amusement on his face. His hands were in his pockets. He shrugged his shoulders.

Mr. Toms stumbled through the stalls. 'Madame, madame, please don't upset yourself. . . .'

Tremlowe appeared from the shadows. 'M'lady, let me take you to your room. . . .'

All sorts of people muttered. . . . 'It's a shame . . . it's ridiculous. . . . What is happening?'

Pauline tried to hold her hand. 'Please, darling, please. . . .'

But still she cried . . . as she stumbled away through the gloomy arena, casting fearful glances behind her, as though indeed she were flying from an assassin. 'He'll kill me . . . he's got a knife . . . why won't someone take him away . . . why won't somebody help me?'

And there, in the dim, sallow light that was reflected from the stage, she stumbled, and fell in a dead faint.

Pauline had only a confused idea of what happened in the ensuing half-hour. She saw Kober struggling violently with several attendants at the back, for Mr. Toms, with a somewhat hysterical gesture, had ordered him to leave the theatre. He refused, not unnaturally, and Mr. Toms, who had worked himself into a state of panic in which he saw the whole opera season ruined, had called for him to be removed by force. It was the most foolish thing he could have done, and it was to cost him dearly later on. But an excuse could be made, even for Mr. Toms. Irela's unreasoned fear had, to a certain extent, communicated itself to all those around her. On the stage little frightened groups of girls huddled together, whispering and trembling, as though at any moment Kober might run amok. Even when he had at last been ejected, there was a sense of intolerable strain.

Irela lay in her dressing-room, sobbing and crying as though she would never stop. Tremlowe hovered over her with smelling salts. John stood pallidly in a corner holding sal volatile on a tray. All sorts of people whom Pauline had never seen before kept darting in and out to know if there was anything to be done. There was only one thing to be done, and that was to get rid of her obsession about Kober. And this was effectually achieved by Mr. Toms, who burst into the room with the words:

'He's gone and he'll never come back!'

'What?' The effect upon Irela was instantaneous. She sat up, and cried, in anything but an hysterical voice, 'Is that a fact?'

'I told him so. I had him thrown out by force.'

The colour flooded back to her cheeks. 'You had him thrown out by force? Tell me . . . tell me!'

Mr. Toms told her. There was not very much to tell, but she insisted on hearing the story over and over again.

'Was he hurt? . . . Oh, I hope he was hurt.'

'Not very much,' said Mr. Toms, the first time he told the story.

'Well, he must have been a little,' said Mr. Toms, the second time.

'I should think he was covered with bruises,' said Mr. Toms, the third time.

When he told the story for the last time they were all convinced that Kober must be mutilated almost beyond recognition.

There remained the question of what was to be done.

'Of course, he may bring an action for assault,' ventured Mr. Toms, with one eye on the sal volatile in case of a relapse.

'He wouldn't dare!' said Irela scornfully. 'We know too much about him and his crooked ways.'

She began to launch into another attack, making wilder and wilder accusations. Fortunately the advent of the doctor forced her to relax. But even while he was feeling her pulse and taking her temperature (both of which proved to be quite normal) she babbled, spasmodically, about the arch-fiend from whom they had so mercifully escaped.

She continued to babble for many days. Gradually, however, she calmed down. Perhaps she realized that she had made herself a little ridiculous, for when the management informed her that it had cost them a thousand pounds to get rid of Kober without causing a scandal, she flew into a rage and accused them of throwing away her money.

Kober returned to the villa in Florence. Pauline often wondered when and where she would meet him again. For she felt that they had not seen the last of him, even yet.

CHAPTER FOUR

I

THE departure of Kober gave Irela a new lease of life. She looked ten years younger. She hummed gaily every morning. She was all smiles and graciousness.

Her appetite, always large, became enormous. She would eat a whole lobster at the beginning of lunch, and then attack with undiminished vigour a wing of chicken, haricots verts, and a large green salad, followed by a chocolate soufflé and a large slice of Brie. And she would talk about her food for a long time after she had eaten it.

'The lobster was delicious,' she observed reminiscently. 'Like nuts. And the chicken . . . beautifully done. I *enjoy* simple food . . . I can't bear messes. The haricots with the melted butter were marvellous . . . so good for one, too, one should always eat lots of vegetables. That's why I'm so healthy . . . I have always eaten lots of vegetables, just as I did to-day.' The fact that she had also eaten a singularly well-developed lobster, and other things which are with difficulty included in the vegetable kingdom, appeared to escape her.

But on days when she sang, these orgies were taboo. A different Irela was then revealed . . . the old restless Irela who fidgeted about the house, trying her voice, snapping at Pauline, proclaiming the iniquities of salt, which she felt sure would intrude itself, somehow or other, into her lunch.

In spite of these temperamental vapours she was singing superbly. The first performance of *Faust* arrived, and was accomplished in a blaze of glory. Perhaps no greater miracle has been seen on the London stage than Irela's performances in these later days. Pauline would never forget 'The Jewel Song' as Irela sang it. The sweet, foolish, frothy music was lifted into a region of pure beauty which would have surprised Gounod himself. And what astonishing physical agility she displayed! As the chorus of this song developed, with its trills and roulades Irela's body seemed to shed its age, to become supple and flexible. High above her head she held the mirror, swaying this way and that, lightly and delicately her hands turned the jewels around her neck, and as she took the high B flat at the end, she ran across the stage as she sang, and twirled round with such grace that the audience stopped the performance every night with their applause.

When Pauline observed how well she looked in *Faust*, and how young the costumes made her appear, Irela observed, without any particular appearance of interest:

'It's because I have such a small behind.' And she turned round in order that Pauline might examine this convenient phenomenon. Pauline agreed that it was very small indeed. Whereupon the æsthetic discussion terminated.

II

There was somebody else, however, who was singing superbly. And that was Baba.

Pauline had no access to the financial records of opera season, but she had a shrewd suspicion that 'Baba nights' were at least as profitable as 'Irela nights.' The British public had taken Baba to its heart. Large photographs of her appeared in the *Tatler* and the *Sketch*, in bed and out of bed, with dog and without dog, but always with a smile.

'There she is, grinning again!' cried Irela, every time she saw her picture. 'What she's got to grin about, I really don't know.' The culminating irritation arrived when one illustrated paper published a full-page picture of Baba, with Irela inset, high up in the top right corner. It was too much to bear. This crisis showed Irela at her fighting best.

Like a brilliant general, outnumbered and harrassed, she summoned up all her technique, all the power of her legend, to withstand the triumphant advance of Baba Letoile.

The press, as ever, was her first consideration. In these early days of March, the door of Charles Street was constantly opening, to admit a gust of mist, closely followed by a reporter from the Daily This or the Evening That. Through the long corridors the reporter would walk, having left his hat and coat in the charge of the dissipated John. Having walked and climbed and panted, he would find himself in the sea-green Adam room, face to face with the commander-in-chief herself, clad in trailing, diaphanous teagowns, which revealed exactly the right proportion of her figure. Irela had strict and highly individual rules about physical exposure. The reporters of morning newspapers saw only an ankle and an elbow. The reporters of evening newspapers were luckier.

But all of them saw the necklace which had been given her by the Tsar, and the bracelet which Queen Alexandra had clasped round her wrist on the anniversary of King Edward's death, when she had sung, 'Comin' thro' the Rye,' to the imminent danger of Her Majesty's complexion. All of them were led over to the little gold casket presented to her by the Dominion of South Africa, in which a hartebeest with emerald eyes glared somewhat invidiously at a coral plaque of King George v. All of them, too, were ushered to the piano, where, also spontaneously, she would trill a few bars of the waltz from *Rosenkavalier* – to break off with a carefully modulated laugh just before Strauss had written a tactless A flat.

So sweet she was and so gracious. Was it surprising that the gossip paragraphs on the subsequent days were full of stories about Irela? For she knew her public, and she had a superb sense of press values. She was well aware that music, as music, is apt to pall upon editors unless it is subtly connected with aristocracy. She realized that it was better (as far as one's public was concerned) to sing flat before a duke than to sing in tune before a commoner. Not that she ever sang flat, except in nightmares, and that was only when Mrs. McPherson had excelled herself in the cauliflower polonaise.

She had a story for them all, and usually it was exactly the sort of story they wanted. For the Conservative papers she had tales of the great Edwardian days . . . days when there really was a grand manner about society, as one realizes from the memoirs of the chief Edwardian figures, which consist, so largely, of a recital of the practical jokes which these admired persons played upon one another. She told of the golden period when Alfred de Rothschild was entertaining at Hackett, of how she tempted the duke to put salt on the ostrich's tail in Alfred's private zoo, of how condescending King Edward had been to the chef, even presenting him with a tie-pin in return for a week-end's indigestion. She spoke, with quite sincere emotion, of the real music-lovers of those days, who would come in from a day's sport, and delay their baths for a good ten minutes while she sang. She was a snob – of course she was a snob – but there was something sublime about her snobbery. For in those days society had been a comparatively new world to her. Queen Victoria had never accepted her. It was left to King Edward – so ironically termed 'the Peace-maker' – to lead her to the topmost steps of fame.

To the women's papers – the 'home' magazines – the fashion journals – and those curious periodicals which, in their text, glorify a simple domestic life, and in their illustrations show countless pictures of the bathrooms of Parisian *cocottes* – to these strange products of English femininity, she showed another side of her nature. She would drag them, creaking boots, dripping umbrellas and all, up the marble staircase and show them the Coromandel screen which she had bought in Paris with her first money – 'Yes, I had to save up for six months to buy that – by the way the Duke of Connaught particularly admires the patine on the scroll – of course, *do* mention that if you like – well, I think it's p-a-t-i-n-e, but I never could spell!' And she would show them her linen cupboard, when she remembered where it was, turning over the sheets lovingly, giving them the impression that she was an entirely domesticated woman, and making a mental reservation to curse the housekeeper for allowing brown marks to appear on the royal Dublin pillow-slips, which had sentimental associations. Delicately she would drift from room to room, her little boy's voice crooning stories of the things she had gathered around her – glancing shrewdly at her visitor to see if she might tell the improper story about the *bidet* in the green room – glancing shrewdly, again, into the tarnished mirror to see if she were looking her best, wondering, 'When, O God, *when* are these women going?' Sinking back into her chair after they had gone, and wondering if it was all worth while.

But she was at her best with the popular dailies. For them she never failed to produce something that was exquisitely apt, something that would always bring a smile to the tired face of a news-editor, used as he was to dreary utterances from celebrities about 'How I keep fit' (accompanied by bilious photographs). Irela, who would have made a very good news-editor herself, never gave out such feeble copy as that. She realized that, for some reason or other, the chief centre of interest for newspaper editors was a mythical being called 'the modern girl.' Who the modern girl might be, where one found her, in what quantities she existed, Irela did not know. All she knew was that the modern girl, apparently, was a safe target for abuse. And so, she abused her. She invented little tit-bits about 'modern girls' who combed their hair at her dining-table (our story, you must remember, is laid in the apocryphal days of 'shingling') – who made up their lips in church – who did not make up their lips in church because they never went to church because they were too busy making up their lips – who tried to smoke when she was singing the death scene in *Bohème*. Almost she convinced herself, after a long repetition of these facile tirades, that the modern girl really existed.

III

One day, at the height of these activities, Pauline entered the room to find Irela bent over her desk. She was wearing sables and a hat with paradise plumes. As Pauline closed the door the wind scattered a bunch of papers on to the carpet.

'Damn you!' screamed Irela. 'Shut the door.' Then she turned round. 'Darling, I didn't know it was you.' She jumped to her feet. 'You've come just in time.' She took Pauline's hand and led her over to the desk. 'I've got an idea.'

'Another?' asked Pauline. She knew that Irela always liked people to say 'another?' after she had informed them that she had an idea. It gave the impression that the listener was dazzled by the flow of Irela's invention.

'Yes, another.' Irela pointed to her own forehead. 'This little brain of mine – it's been working again.' She fumbled among the papers. 'Ah! here's the best one. Listen!'

She sat down on the desk, and declaimed, in tones that would have drawn tears from the eyes of angels, the following singular announcement:

'Madame Irela, having been faithfully served by the house of Blank over a period of blank years, has much pleasure in bearing testimony to the excellence of the blank with which she has been supplied.'

'What d'you think of that?'

Pauline was completely in the dark. 'I don't quite understand,' she said. 'What is it?'

'Really, darling, don't be tiresome.' Irela tapped her foot impatiently on the chair. 'It's my testimonial.'

'To whom?'

'To anybody who wants it. Good people, of course. The stores. And Paquin. And Fortnum and Mason.

All those people. Don't you think it's a good idea?'

Pauline was trying to frame some sort of reply when Irela broke in again excitedly:

'I thought of it yesterday afternoon going down Bond Street. Wherever you went you saw something in the shops about that Baba creature. I counted no less than four face creams she was supposed to have used – I suppose that's why she always has a spotty chin. Then there was a car she was supposed to have driven in. Why anybody should want to know what car that woman drives in, unless they want something to carry cows to market, God only knows. Anyway, there she was. And lozenges. Heavens! The amount of cough drops that woman eats. She's probably got her mouth full of them when she sings the mad scene. They even had Baba fountain pens – as if she knew how to write her own name.'

Pauline interrupted her. 'But, darling, *you* don't have to worry about that. . . .'

'Worry?' Irela swept out her hands. 'Worry? Who said I *was* worrying? I don't have to use methods like that. I'm a singer – not a champion lozenge-eater. All the same . . .'

'But it's so undignified. . . .'

'What – my testimonial . . .?'

Pauline quickly corrected herself. 'No . . . no . . . I mean *her* methods are so undignified. Wouldn't it be best to ignore them?'

'Really, darling, you do say foolish things sometimes. How can I ignore all these things . . .? Why, it's an *attack*!' She snorted so violently that Pauline wondered if she was going to promote Baba to the position lately occupied by Kober.

'Oh well . . . in that case . . .' Pauline took up the proposed testimonial somewhat gingerly. 'It does look impressive, of course.'

'Yes . . . yes . . . you think so?'

Pauline had by now discovered that if Irela had determined to run in any direction, it was much better to let her have her head, . . . even to encourage her. So she said :

'Almost like Royalty, isn't it?'

Irela beamed. 'That's just what I thought.'

'By appointment to the Queen of Song,' added Pauline with a smile.

'Oh, my dear, what a divine phrase!' Irela was enchanted. 'By appointment to the Queen of Song. *Most* happy! I wonder if we could put it in? Or would it sound a little . . .?'

'Perhaps it would sound a little. . .' Pauline also omitted the adjective. 'People are so catty.'

'Catty!' She snorted again. 'I should say they were. Still, they can't say anything about *this*!'

'No,' agreed Pauline.

The testimonials were engraved and framed, and each frame was surmounted with a golden monogram. They spent a hectic morning delivering them. Most of the shopkeepers were a little bewildered, and had no idea what she wanted them to do. One embarrassed attendant at Fortnum and Mason's thought that he was being served with a writ, and rushed into the street. But on the whole, the reception of her idea quite satisfied Irela.

'Charmed, they were, didn't you think?' she said to Pauline after the last testimonial was delivered.

'Yes, and indeed they should be.'

'So few people have the *human* touch,' Irela observed. 'So few people ever seem to think that even their tradespeople have hearts. Darling, you're sitting on most of the rug . . . do you mind? Thank you . . . that they have hearts.'

Then, quite inconsequently she said, 'I wonder if people who've got my testimonial would take something off their bills?'

These little framed documents had a short life. They were soon relegated to back corners of the shops. Most of them were thrown away, the rest grew dusty and spotted. They would make an interesting addition to any collection of Irelana.

IV

Then, one day, when the stream of Irela's life seemed running merrily, when the press and the public were playing up perfectly, Irela returned home with a black face.

'Come upstairs,' she snapped to Pauline.

Pauline followed her, wondering what had happened.

Irela banged the door after her. Then she turned round and said:

'I've just been to that fool Campbell.'

Pauline remembered their former visit to Campbell, when he had examined Irela's throat. On that occasion Irela had said he was the greatest throat specialist in the world. He had attended her for forty years. And now she was calling him a fool. This was indeed astonishing.

'But I thought . . . '

'*Do* let me say what I'm going to say!' Irela was evidently very nervy indeed. 'He says I've got to take things easy.'

Pauline caught her breath. 'Not . . . not your voice?'

'No. Blood pressure.'

'My dear!' She stepped forward impulsively. But Irela waved her away with a petulant gesture.

'Don't *fuss*, darling!' Then, seeing that she had spoken a little brusquely, she added, in a less harsh voice, 'It's nothing.'

'But . . . but does it mean you won't be able to . . . to finish the opera season?'

Irela turned on her with flashing eyes. 'No, it does *not*!' She stood quite still, staring at Pauline as though Pauline had insulted her. Then she turned away again. 'It's nothing,' she laughed a little bitterly. 'At least, it's only old age.'

The light caught her profile. Her head was held very high. Her whole poise was defiant. Yet Pauline noticed, with a pang of sympathy, that her hands were trembling violently.

'So she is going to defy it, to defy the inevitable,' she thought. 'And she is afraid . . . though she will not show it.' She realized that all her tact, and all her understanding, would be called upon in this emergency.

Irela sat down. She looked very tired. Pauline came up to her.

'Won't you tell me what Campbell said?'

The words came out jerkily, with long pauses in between. 'He said I had high blood-pressure . . . two hundred . . . he put a sort of machine on my arm and tested it . . . it ought to be about a hundred and sixty . . . I don't understand it . . . I've never felt better in my life. . . . Then he said I ought to cut down my rôles and only sing once a week for the rest of the season. . . . Of course I can't possibly do that . . . he's a fool. . . .'

'But if he *says* it. . . .'

'He's a fool! Fool! Fool!' She stamped her foot angrily. 'No . . . he isn't a fool. But he doesn't understand my will power. Nobody understands that!'

'Oh, my dear, I'm terribly anxious.'

Irela looked away. She put her hand quickly in Pauline's. 'Thank you, darling, there's no need to be.'

Then she rose to her feet. 'I've got a great deal to do.' Her voice was brighter now. 'Pills to take, dietings, and lying down, and heaven knows what else.'

'I'll help . . . I'll do everything that's wanted.'

'I wish you could, darling, but you can't.'

'But surely . . .'

'He says I have to have a nurse.'

'Oh!' Pauline could not prevent her face from falling.

'It's the damnedest bore I've ever known.'

'But . . . *must* you?'

At that moment the incongruity of the whole situation came home with full force to Pauline. Here was Irela, who that very night would be enchanting a vast audience as Desdemona . . . drifting across the stage as a slim virgin in her teens . . . here she was, announcing the fact that she was an old lady who had to have a nurse. A nurse to see that she took her medicine . . . to watch her temperature . . . her diet. A nurse, because she was an old lady with high blood-pressure . . . and soon she would be painting her face, and lifting up her lovely voice in supplication to Othello.

'It's either that . . . or . . . or . . .'

Irela could not finish the sentence. She only held her head higher still. Her neck was rigid, and her hands tightly clenched. Then she closed her eyes, for she would not let the tears come . . . those tears which were more of wounded pride than of self-pity. Pauline could find no words to say. Soon Irela, her eyes still closed, motioned her away. And it was thus that Pauline left her.

V

From the first moment, Irela bitterly resented the presence of Nurse Phillips. She was a bright little woman of about forty, with red hair. She was rather short-sighted, and wore gold-rimmed glasses, or as she called them, 'pince-nez' – which left a red mark on her nose when she took them off. She was a Canadian, and that seemed only to increase Irela's prejudice. She snapped at her, flatly declined to obey her instructions, and daily sought means to thwart and embarrass her.

Nurse Phillips, however, refused to be browbeaten. Nothing that Irela did or said was able to affect her active and perpetual brightness. She was bright by birth, and her profession had only given an extra polish to her natural disposition. She went about the house humming little snatches of hymns, occasionally bursting into words, which were always of the brightest possible character, describing angel hosts . . . (she pronounced it anejell) . . . clustering round glittering thrones, disposed upon pearly floors.

Irela would encounter her humming in the corridor, would pause, glower at her, and say:

'Trying to teach me to sing, eh?'

Whereupon Nurse Phillips would break into the brightest of laughs and leave Irela for once in a way defeated. It was terrible . . . like trying to argue with a sunbeam.

Pauline wondered how long the smile would stay on Nurse Phillips' face. Not very long, she thought, after a little scene which she witnessed in Irela's bedroom.

She had gone to Irela, as usual, to deal with the correspondence. When she entered the room she found Nurse Phillips standing by Irela's bed, holding a wine-glass of medicine on a tray. The atmosphere was electric.

'Good morning, darling!' Irela gave Pauline a highly theatrical smile. Then without looking at Nurse Phillips she said to her, 'You can go now.'

'Not until you've taken your medicine!' Oh – the brightness of Nurse Phillips! It seemed to fill the room. So clean was she, and so fiercely cheerful that she might have been one of her own 'anejells.'

'I've told you I don't want it.' Irela picked up a letter and tore it open with fingers that trembled angrily.

'I'm waiting!' Nurse Phillips pronounced very genteelly, as though it were spelt 'weeting.' But even so, she managed to make it sound very bright indeed, and she held her head on one side, regarding Irela with an expression that would have been arch had it not been so spiritual.

Irela with a supreme effort of control said, 'I hate the filthy stuff. It makes me feel sick.'

'Ah!' Nurse Phillips shook her head. 'We mustn't think of that. We must think of the good it is going to do to your beautiful voice!'

Pauline gasped, for she saw Irela screwing up her eyes, and clenching her teeth . . . a sure signal that an outburst was impending. Would Nurse Phillips have the sense to stop, and retreat? No . . . she was going on again:

'After all, it is a gift of God, isn't it?' Nurse

Phillips spoke like a peculiarly irritating evangelist. 'And we must be thankful for the gifts of God, mustn't we, and keep them and cherish them for as long as we can? So that is why you must take your medicine!'

She held it out to her again. Irela did not move or speak, not because she had nothing to say but because she was for the moment stifled and paralysed with rage. She felt as though she were going to explode. Nurse Phillips, misinterpreting her silence, imagining that Irela was weighing her words in the balance, continued:

'We must not think only of ourselves, must we? We must think of the thousands of people whom you can make happy' (pronounced 'heppy') 'by your wonderful gift. . . . We must think of the sunshine you can . . .'

And then the explosion came. Irela shot out her right arm and struck the tray out of Nurse Phillips' hand. The medicine shot all over her uniform, the tray fell with a loud clatter into the fireplace, the glass was shattered on the floor.

'Damn you! Damn your sunshine! Damn your medicine. . . .'

Irela leapt out of bed, disclosing a vast amount of her legs and her chest. Then she threw the counterpane over her shoulders, and swept to the furthest corner of the room, where she turned and glared at Nurse Phillips like an animal at bay, muttering things which Pauline could not catch.

This astonishing scene was, apparently, the one thing which was needed to bring Nurse Phillips' brightness to fever pitch. Only for the briefest instant did she betray any suspicion that anything was amiss. Then she gave the gayest of laughs, and flicked her uniform with her large, red, playful fingers. 'All over me!' she exclaimed happily, as though, instead of breaking a medicine-glass over her, Irela had anointed her from an alabaster box. 'Why, I'm quite covered!' she continued, in accents of delight. 'What a fright I must look!'

'You do!' snorted Irela, who was still standing in her corner.

Nurse Phillips laughed heartily and began to pick up the pieces of glass. Pauline helped her.

Irela cried from the corner, 'Let her do it, Pauline.'

Pauline took no notice. They bent over the fragments together, while Nurse Phillips said, with ever-increasing enthusiasm, 'Such a shock I had! Ha, ha! I thought the end of the world had come!' She even broke into a snatch of hymn, singing something about 'The anejells in their haunts of gold,' as she cut her finger on a fragment of glass. Pauline felt slightly hysterical.

Nurse Phillips rose to her feet, beamed, and said:

'There . . . I think that's everything! But you must put on your slippers at once!'

Irela did not reply. She could think of no language strong enough.

Nurse Phillips bustled over and put the slippers by her side.

'And in half an hour,' she said, 'I shall come back with another dose!' Whereupon with a final girlish laugh she left the room.

Irela let the counterpane fall from her shoulders. She sank into a chair.

'She'll kill me . . .' she gasped. 'I can't cope with it. . . . I can't . . . . that damned smile.'

And indeed for the moment she was beaten. Beaten by brightness.

CHAPTER FIVE

I

PAULINE was of the breed of women to whom loyalty is a curse.

Most women have a spark of it, and many have a fine flame – a flame which burns in countless homes. Often enough it is the only light that burns there – the light to which children turn instinctively, and the light which no man can put out, though he may curse it, try to stifle it, or turn away from it utterly. And in some women this loyalty to a person or an ideal is so intense that the flame consumes them . . . burning up their lives in sacrifice to drunkards and bullies and cheats. A useless sacrifice, you may say . . . and in a sense you will be right. All sacrifices are useless, when the smoke has blown away, when the offering is charred and the flame is dead. Yet the bright glow of that flame may flicker on, far into the years, in the memory of some man's heart, and may guide him in the dark ways that lie before him, though he knows not whence the light has come.

Pauline was obviously in very great danger by reason of her loyalty to Irela, and unless that loyalty is admitted and understood, her subsequent actions are meaningless. In the theatre, during the first thrilling performance of *Bohème*, she had turned to

Donald and said, 'You see . . . the enchantment, the spell she has over you?' And Donald had agreed, unwillingly, hating that enchantment. But it was not only magic that held Pauline to Irela, even if we grant Irela's uncanny power of domination, her astonishing capacity for getting her own way. It was not, indeed, Irela who held Pauline by her side at all. Pauline held herself.

II

And then Donald asked her to marry him.

It was snowing, and they were standing at the entrance to the stage-door of the Imperial Theatre, where Pauline had gone on business for Irela. The doorway was deserted for it was early afternoon, and by contrast with the distant bustle of the Strand the little street on to which they were looking seemed strangely quiet.

She was glad of this quiet, glad too that it was being enhanced by the snow, which fell so stealthily, as though its delicate tiny feathers were playing a secret game of their own. Often she had wondered where he would propose to her. She had not wondered very urgently, because they had both taken it for granted that they would marry, sooner or later. But she experienced a strange tremor of relief when he spoke, for she had feared that he might choose some place which was wild and strange, where the careful little arguments which she had prepared to put before him would fall on deaf ears.

Here she felt that she might speak and he would listen.

He asked her quite quietly, not even looking at her. 'When are we going to get married, Pauline?'

She put her hand in his and stared out into the snow. 'Some day.'

'To-morrow?'

'Of course!'

'I'm not kidding, Pauline.'

And as she turned to him she saw a pair of grave, serious eyes. She looked away again, nervously. 'Don't be absurd.'

'Is it absurd to want to marry you?'

'Well, no . . . at least, I hope not. . . . But we've got to think about it a little first.'

'What have we got to think about? Don't you love me?'

'Of course. But . . .'

'But what?'

She laughed hopelessly. 'Darling, you *are* being rather difficult. You can't marry somebody as though you were merely asking them to lunch.'

'I'm not marrying "somebody." I'm marrying you. And I don't see why we shouldn't marry straight away.'

This discussion was not developing at all as she had expected. To gain time, she said, 'You've never said anything about this before.'

'No. But then I didn't realize till yesterday what a hold Irela had over you.'

'Oh, I see.' She spoke very quickly. At all costs she wanted to keep Irela's name out of this. 'Yes . . . of course . . . but that was nothing, nothing at all.' She searched for arguments. Then she said, rather abruptly, 'What should we live on?'

'I'd make a hundred dollars a week. . . . I often do. . . .'

'Yes . . . but where?'

'Why . . . any place. . . . I run around a bit, I guess. . . . Still, you could come with me.'

'You'd have double travelling expenses. . . . I'd get in the way. If you were married, instead of just jumping into a train and going after some story, you'd stop and wonder whether you ought to come home . . . and you'd miss the train.'

He laughed. 'And wouldn't I be glad I *had* missed it.'

'Don . . . we've got to think of these things. . . . I want you, but I want a home too . . . and we've got so much time.'

'So much time!' He was not laughing now. 'And *you* say that!'

'Besides . . .' she added desperately, for it now seemed impossible to keep Irela out of it any longer, 'there's Irela.'

'Ah!' He folded his arms, and the corners of his mouth turned down. 'Now we're getting to it!'

'Don . . . please don't be angry. . . .'

He did not answer her. She shivered. What a strange proposal this is, she thought, with neither of us able to speak our real minds, and the snow falling, falling! Like the third act of *Bohème*. . . . And as the thought came into her head it seemed as though thin strains of music floated down the street, and the snowflakes danced in time. And through the white-laced air a pale limelight seemed to flutter its fingers, tingeing the dancing flakes to a silver-green which had a quality more of the theatre than of life. 'Yet,' she thought, 'there is nothing theatrical about *me*. I am really a very ordinary creature. If things were different, I should be saying "Yes" to Donald, and preparing to set up a home, somewhere, anywhere, and looking forward to having babies, and loving them.' Her eyes filled with tears. No longer did the snow seem to fall as a sweet benediction. A bitter wind had found its way into the street, and was stirring the flakes angrily, marring the pale pattern of their fall, stinging them to wild confusion. She closed her eyes. She heard Donald saying:

'I'm glad you mentioned Irela. Because she's obviously the whole problem.'

'How do you mean?'

'You know quite well. You feel you oughtn't to leave her.'

'Well, darling . . . in the middle of the opera season. . . .'

'I wouldn't care tuppence about the opera season if I thought you'd come to me when it was over. Will you?'

Instantly Irela seemed to rise before her. She saw the stern, angry old face, that she both loved and feared. Would she go to Donald as soon as it was over . . . in a mere six weeks? She dared not answer the question. She would try . . . oh, indeed, she would try, and she prayed that strength might be given her, in order that she might obey the impulse which was telling her to run straight to his arms. Meanwhile she must pull herself together. She prevaricated. She said, with assumed levity, 'I may get the sack long before then.'

'Do you really think that?'

'No. But still . . . '

'Supposing she never wants you to leave her?'

'Oh – but that's impossible.'

'Are you sure?'

'Why . . . of course.' But somehow she said it hesitantly.

'Whom else has she got to look after her, if you go?'

'Well . . . ' she paused. Then she said. 'There would be heaps of people, only too glad. After all . . . there are hundreds of secretaries . . .'

'There's only one Pauline.'

She smiled. 'Thank you.'

'And she knows it!' There was a bitter tone in his voice which made her turn towards him sharply.

He put his hands gently on her shoulders. 'Listen, Pauline. You mustn't think me jealous or alarmist or anything like that. But I don't think you quite understand the situation. Irela's sixty, or thereabouts. It's as dangerous an age as there is for a woman . . . especially a woman like her. She's the loneliest woman I've ever met. You could see that in her eyes even if you knew nothing about her life. But I do know something about her life . . . perhaps more than you. She's got *nobody*. Nobody loves her. She's got a few old relations . . . they bore her to death, they don't mix with her friends, they only hang around because of her fame. There have been lovers, vaguely, – but as far as I know, they've all gone . . . though they say there is still one somewhere . . . however, the fact remains that she's alone in the world except for a lot of silly society people, who don't really accept her, who never have accepted her . . . who only asked her to their houses because she might sing for nothing. . . .'

'Oh, Don!' She looked at him reproachfully. 'You're being terribly cruel.'

'I'm not. It's all true,' he protested. Then, more quietly: 'I shouldn't be so scared, Pauline, if you weren't so damned nice, so unselfish, so loyal. Before long, you'll find her playing up to that loyalty . . . taking advantage of it . . . no, please let me finish what I want to say . . . the facts stare you in the face. Here's Irela, intensely lonely, intensely possessive, accustomed all her life to getting her own way. And now, in this crisis of her life, she's found you . . . and she's found in you someone whom she can treat as a substitute for the daughter she always longed to have – you didn't know that, did you? – and at the same time get every ounce of service and companionship out of you. . . .'

'Don . . .'

'I'm nearly through. All I want to say is this. If she's possessive now, when she's still singing, when her whole mind's occupied, what is she going to be when the season is over, when she really faces retirement at last?'

'Why . . . she'll . . . I'll . . .' Then she stopped. It was as though she had come to a blank wall, across which the one word Irela was written. She told herself that it was all absurd . . . that she was tired, excited, abnormal . . . that she loved Donald, that these imaginary fears would all vanish in the morning. She could think of nothing to say, except, very unsteadily, 'I shall go on loving you . . . that's all.'

And then he put his arms round her. Little flakes of snow fell from his shoulders on to her hands. The touch of his cheek was icy . . . yet it warmed her, fired her. He said:

'Oh, darling . . . we're young, *young*! And we'll never be young again. One day this snow will make us cough and shiver and draw close to the fire, whereas to-day it only seems like the beginning of an adventure. It seems so friendly . . . doesn't it . . . ? Look at it!' And he turned and pointed to the drifting flakes. But quickly his eyes sought hers again.

'Don't keep me too long, darling . . . don't keep me too long.'

There was pain in his eyes. It was still there when she answered with desperate gaiety:

'I'll only keep you six hours, Don. You haven't forgotten that you're coming with me to *Othello* to-night?'

'No.' He spoke dully.

'And that we really are going to have supper afterwards?'

He smiled – a strange smile.

'And now I must go.'

They said good-bye almost formally. She sat very still in the taxi, and her eyes were closed.

III

When Pauline walked into Charles Street, an extraordinary sight met her eyes. At least, it was extraordinary in view of the fact that Irela was singing that night. For the room was crowded with people. She was giving a cocktail party!

Pauline stood in the doorway, amazed. What was the explanation of it? Had Irela forgotten that she was singing? But no . . . that was impossible . . . they had been talking about it for at least an hour that very morning. Had she gone mad? But no . . . she seemed to be not only sane, but in the highest spirits, moving rapidly in and out of a crowd of smart people. Pauline felt completely at a loss. She had expected to come back to a quiet house, hushed and expectant . . . to find Irela lying down, preparing for the night's ordeal . . . wondering whether Mrs. McPherson would put salt in the omelette . . . wondering whether Dingley's neck would be red . . . wondering whether the fiendish Kober would turn up with a hostile claque. But now, she seemed to be wondering about nothing at all. She had just snatched a misted yellow glass from John and was standing by the fire, with one hand on her hip, laughing flirtatiously to a group of somewhat *passé* gallants.

Then she saw Pauline.

She put down her glass and came towards her. Seizing her arm, she stepped out into the hall.

'My dear,' she said excitedly, 'it's that damned Nurse Phillips!'

'But . . . but what has she done?'

'She's killing me!' She said it fiercely, although the effect of her denunciation was weakened by a bright smile and a greeting to a late-comer. . . . ('Go in there, Bernard, darling, and get toxy-boo, I'll be along in a minute.') Then she turned to Pauline again. 'Killing me!'

Pauline looked at her. Then she looked past her, through the double doors. She supposed that all this gaiety was, in some way or other, a subtle reply to Nurse Phillips' domination . . . a sort of revenge. And Irela's words, the next moment confirmed her suspicions.

'Fuss, fuss, fuss! Like a governess! Have I taken this? Have I taken that? And always singing hymns! God . . . those hymns! She'll turn me into a raving atheist before I'm much older. Then, this morning, after you left me' – she looked at Pauline with an expression which seemed to suggest that she had been cruelly deserted, – 'and when I was all alone, with nobody in the house . . .'

'I had to go to the theatre for you,' interposed Pauline in self-defence.

'I know, darling. I was saying, she came in and wanted to take my blood pressure! Said I looked flushed. Me! *Me!* I told her something! I gave her a talking-to she won't forget in a hurry. And as soon as I'd finished with her, I sat down at the telephone and I rang up all the friends I could think of.'

'But my dear, you know you're singing to-night!'

'Well, what if I am?'

'But you always rest.'

'I'm sick of resting.'

'And you never drink anything.'

'You're as bad as Nurse Phillips!' she snapped. 'I'm only having a cocktail. Desdemona having a cocktail!' This last remark she cried out shrilly to an old man who, at that moment, came through the doors, bent over her hand, and made his smirking adieux. When he had gone, Irela gulped her cocktail defiantly.

'Why shouldn't I?' She drew herself up proudly. 'Heavens, anybody would think I was a hundred, the way you talk. *Othello's* nothing to me . . . nothing! I can take it in my stride.' She stared at Pauline, as though expecting to be contradicted. 'When I sang it in the old days I never worried! I did things far more exhausting than drinking a cocktail, ten minutes before I went on the stage!' A rather unpleasant glitter came into her eyes. 'Why should I worry now?'

Pauline, hesitantly, said, 'Of course, you know best.'

'Thank you for *that*!' Her voice was extremely ironic.

Pauline felt hurt. 'I was only thinking of you. I was only anxious that you shouldn't overtire yourself.'

Irela melted. 'Darling! Don't take me too seriously. I know what I'm about. Now don't let's bother about it any more. I want to go and enjoy myself. It's an early party. I'm shoving them all off at six.'

She took Pauline by the arm and steered her into the room. They passed from group to group. Pauline had a swift impression of old faces and rich furs . . . the whole room smelt of mink and lilies, and it echoed with cracked voices. There passed before her a panorama of yellow withered necks, with velvet bands round them, and diamond clasps at the back. She smiled into a succession of faded violet lips, clasped a number of slim gloved hands through which the bones could be felt crackling.

Irela left her with a tightly corseted old creature who belonged to the type which is described by the newspapers as 'clubman' when it commits suicide. As he leered at her his yellow teeth gleamed beneath an orange-white moustache. His lids were mauve and puffy.

'We're rather an old lot for you, my young lady – ha?'

'Why. . . ?' Pauline hesitated. She would have liked to have said that they were not only old but dead. Then she collected herself, and replied gallantly, 'I think it's a charming party . . . much better than a lot of silly young people.'

Her companion sighed. It was not quite the reply he had hoped for. He looked at his cocktail, wondered if he dared swallow it, caught sight of himself in the glass, noted the swollen veins on his forehead, decided that he had better not, and put the glass down. When he turned round, Pauline had slipped away. She felt incapable of anything but general politeness just now.

As she wandered through the crowded rooms, Pauline felt more and more oppressed. Hitherto she had not guessed the reason for this curious lethargy of spirit which always seized her when Irela entertained. But now she knew that it was because all these people were old – old – they belonged to an era which was long dead and buried – they resented the days in which they lived. Although the late sunlight streamed through the windows, and the sound of the traffic came from the hurrying streets, she had a disturbing sense that this was a house of refugees – frightened, trembling refugees who had come to seek shelter from the rude winds that buffeted them in the modern world.

She stood back in a corner, and the illusion became more intense. Surely these men and these women, so tall and slender, so courteous and so malicious, had stepped from the dry yellow pages of du Maurier's *Punch*? Surely the door would soon swing open, to frame the figure of Oscar Wilde, while Lord Alfred Douglas, smoothing the fair hair which a genius had turned to gold, would slink by, an echo of an echo? And Patti – corseted and powdered –

was not she expected? And perhaps Labouchère? And Tosti – with his fingers still stained from the ink with which he had written the last chords of 'Good-bye'? Was not the street outside lined with hansom cabs, and was there not a red carpet, glowing in the primrose light of the *fin-de-siècle*, spread expectantly for the possible advent of His Royal Highness, Prince Edward of Wales?

The chatter rose and fell, the snow veiled the windows, the lights glowed from the corners, painting the yellow orchids to trembling life, the pale, doomed footmen glided round with their plates of caviare sandwiches, and still Pauline found herself unable to shake off the spell which had been cast over her. Echoes of conversation drifted to her ears – a few feet away was Admiral Hinchberry – tall, mauve of complexion, perpetually drooping, intoning some tale about the occasion when the German Crown Prince had stayed with him in his castle. Near him was poor Lady Waterlee, whose coiffure alone was enough to recall a whole age of forgotten leisure, bowing and smirking as ladies used to bow and smirk when they had nothing better to do. There was Alan Grange, in his black stock and his exquisitely fitting frock-coat – a horrible caricature of his famous portrait of some forty years before – that portrait which had played so curious a part in the careers of certain eminent civil servants, now exercising English reserve in tropical climates.

Yes – the shutters were drawn – the barricades against life had been thrown up – this was a mere masque by candle-light, a shadow-show, a despairing gesture in the face of an age which had proved too cruel and too swift. And the leader of the ceremonies – the centre of the tragi-comedy, was Irela herself. More than any of the others did she proclaim herself as part of a vanished age, and yet, by her tremendous vitality, she was also of the present. She moved among them with girlish cries and gestures. She had never been in better form.

'Minnie, darling,' to one, 'I'm getting toxy-boo! I'm celebrating it!'

'Arthur, you old devil,' to another, 'are you coming to hear me to-night? Sing the "Ave Maria" on top of a whole lot of cocktails?'

'Listen!' to a third. And she began to parody the 'Ave Maria . . . Ave Maria, hic!' It was a rather frightening exhibition. Pauline feared for Irela as she had never feared before. She was thankful when the tall Empire clock on the mantelpiece struck six, sharply, maliciously . . . for Irela was true to her word, and with a great many trills and flutters shooed them out of the room.

The strange assembly crowded out. The room was dense with cigarette smoke. Most of the tables were marked with little rings and pools where the cocktail glasses had been set down.

Irela did not come back into the room. Indeed, there was not time for her to do so. Pauline only had a glimpse of a flushed face, and a stream of purple tulle as she swept towards the lift. She wondered what was in store for Nurse Phillips. Most of all she wondered what was in store for the audience at the opera. For the rôle of Desdemona in *Othello* is calculated to tax the strength even of a young soprano.

Young! The word made Pauline flinch. The very idea of youth in this house seemed grotesque. She went to the window and threw it open wide. The snow had stopped, and an icy wind was rising. It blew through the room like a knife, cutting the purple layers of smoke into fantastic shapes.

Pauline shivered. Then she shut the window again, and went up to dress.

CHAPTER SIX

I

VERDI was eighty when he wrote *Othello*. The first act might have been written by a young man exulting in his youth . . . seizing his pen and recording at top speed the fierce storms of melody that assaulted him, ruffling his hair and stinging his blood. It is riotous, windy music, and though the land over which it blows has long since been charted and tamed by later composers, it was a new land when Verdi discovered it, and he noted its beauties with wild and undimmed eyes.

The last act is ageless – beginning as it does with the 'Willow Song,' that has the radiant simplicity of a folk tune, and ending with the 'Ave Maria' . . . that luminous prayer that is like a white candle burning.

But over the two middle acts there broods a horrible senility. The melodies are sickly, like a lecherous old man's caresses . . . directed by no vital impulse, but by the memory of sweets of long ago. The declamations are dull and turgid, as though the aged composer were sitting by the fire, muttering over grievances that had long ceased to exist save in his own weary head. The drama echoes thin. Here is no giant's voice, splitting the air with brutal disdain. Rather is there the sense of an old man standing in a doorway through which he cannot pass, seeing the tragedy, tortured by it, but able only to wave his impotent hands and utter his querulous complaints. For the musically imaginative, these two acts of *Othello* are sheer horror . . . there is a world of weariness in the feeble moaning of the wood wind, the flickering spasms of the strings, the silly, empty beating of the drums.

And it was this curious unequal opera, so utterly out of tune with the currents of modern musical thought, that Irela had chosen for her final bow to the great public! She was to sing it, in all, four times. Pauline, sitting silently in the car by Irela's side, had a strange premonition that she would not sing it more than once.

II

The troubles of the evening were initiated, once again, by a contingent of extremely young and irreverent persons who were occupying the seats immediately in front of Pauline and Donald. Their conversation echoed towards Pauline's ears like a knell of doom.

'My dear, wait till she's singing the "Maiden's Prayer"!'

'The "Ave Maria," darling.'

'Sorry . . . in a lovely night-dress, too. *Did* you see what Patrick wrote in his gossip column to-day? That it was an old family night-dress?'

'Darling, it *was*. . . . She told me so herself.'

'But it sounds so obscene – a family night-dress – like "Father says turn and we all turn." '

'Everything's terrifically "family" in this act. She's got real linen sheets on the bed simply covered in monograms.'

'How awful if she swallowed a monogram and died before Othello choked her!'

'She'll have choked herself long before that with her own voice. It's *too* fantastic. Singing Desdemona when one's grandchildren are romping all over Eastbourne sands.'

'Much more likely to be romping all over Le Touquet.'

'I adore it. I'm all for very old people doing everything so long as we can lie back and watch them. I want Fanny Ward to sing and sing, and Mary Garden to rush about till her knees crack, and I'd like to see them *die* in the very act. . . .'

'Too disgusting you are, Binny. Necrophilian!'

'I've always been necrophilian. That's why I came here to-night.'

Pauline could stand it no longer. She turned to Donald. 'Please . . . please say something. It's unbearable, the way they're talking.'

Donald had not been listening so intently as Pauline. He had caught only the last few sentences. He leaned forward and gripped the arm of the young necrophilian. At that moment the lights went down, so that Pauline was not quite sure what had happened. But when the first act was over, the young man was still extremely pale, and apart from a few disgusted glances in their direction, the little group gave them no more trouble for the rest of the evening.

III

Have you ever been in a theatre tenanted by the dead? No. That is a rhetorical question which should not be demanded by any self-respecting author. Yet the question twisted itself through Pauline's brain during the two dreadful acts which followed.

Irela was singing badly. That was a fact which had to be faced from the moment that she made her first appearance. Only rarely did the lovely spell proclaim itself, and almost immediately it was broken by some obvious flaw . . . by a laboured effect of breathing, by a soft note sung *mezzo-forte*, most of all by the tell-tale 'woody' quality of her middle register. She was singing the right notes in the right place, and that was about all that could be said for her. As for her appearance – she looked like a tired old woman, grimacing with obvious effort into the face of a man young enough to be her grandson.

This was a tragedy which Pauline had foreseen, and, because she had foreseen it, the blow fell with less immediate weight. When she arrived at the theatre she was already numb with apprehension. The behaviour of the young persons in front of her had not stirred her out of this lethargy. But now, as the second act rolled on and on, with ever emptier echoes, with an increasing tension on the part of the orchestra, and with a more obvious strain on Irela, Pauline began to be seized with a cold cramp of fear.

'Like a story by Poe,' she whispered to herself. She had not realized the tension to which her nerves had been strung. 'They're all dead . . . dead.' She stared around her, and indeed there seemed evidence for her assertion. The people in the boxes were like dimly lit waxworks. The dress circle was a row of limp cardboard figures. Immediately behind her was a stagnant sea of masks. Even Sovino, waving his conductor's wand, was an automaton, who might at any moment collapse and shrink with a whirr of wheels into his cardboard box.

IV

Her face was very white when, after the third act, she threaded her way through the stone corridors outside the dressing-rooms. She was not sure why she was going to see Irela at all. Yet she went. She was glad she did so. It brought her back to reality.

Nurse Phillips had arrived, just in front of her. Pauline slipped in, smiled wanly at Irela, and watched the little comedy progress. Nurse Phillips stood in the entrance to the dressing-room, and on her face was an expression of highly wrought brightness. She was completely unmusical . . . so much so that she did not even dislike music, it was only a blurred and ridiculous sound to her. But she was determined to do her duty to her patient, which was to encourage her, to give her moral support, on all occasions. This was such an occasion. And so she said, in a hard, professional voice:

'It is *quate* beautiful!'

'On the contrary, Nurse Phillips, it's bloody.'

Nurse Phillips winced, lifted her upper lip in an attempt at a smile, and achieved an outraged titter.

'Bloody!' repeated Irela with emphasis, seizing her virgin's veil from Tremlowe's shaking hands, and cramming it over her head. 'And what is more, I don't want any damn fool compliments from *you*, Nurse Phillips. I've got a sore throat, and I know it.'

'A sore throat!' Instantly Nurse Phillips retrieved her self-respect. When people had sore throats she was at a premium. All nurses are at a premium when people have sore throats. Nurse Phillips drew herself up.

'You must spray it at once!' she said. 'I have the atomizer and the antiseptic solution.' She bustled over to the dressing-table. 'I only brought just a teeny weeny little bottle, but . . . ha, ha! it will destroy all the microbes that even *you* have been able to collect!' She wondered if that sounded quite polite, but she had not time to put it more politely.

'I've got no microbes!' Irela almost yelled the words. 'It's not any microbe that's troubling me, thank you! All that's the matter with me is that I've been singing top C's for the past two hours while you've been lounging back in the stalls eating nougat! That's all that's wrong with *me* . . . the fact that I've been earning my living, to keep *you* . . .

so please don't come in here trying to make me frightened about microbes!'

'One should not neglect a sore throat. One should . . .'

'Shut up!'

Nurse Phillips closed her eyes. She was probably summoning the assistance of some of her 'anejells.' At any rate, a much brighter expression came over her face. For she had a sudden idea. She opened her eyes, and sniffed. Stared round the room. Sniffed again.

'What the devil are you sniffing for?'

'There's a most peculiar smell,' said Nurse Phillips brightly.

'Then go outside the door, and there won't be.'

Still more brightly Nurse Phillips said, 'Are you sure that the drains . . . after all, in an old theatre like this . . . one never knows.'

At which Irela finally flared up. 'Drains!' she cried, switching round in her chair, and confronting her with a face that gibbered beneath the thick paint. 'Here am I just going on to sing the "Ave Maria" and you come in and dribble about the drains. Christ!'

'Well, really. . . . '

'Yes, really! What do you think the "Ave Maria" is? Eh? A prayer to the sanitary inspector? What do you think I want to be thinking about when I sing it? Drains? Perhaps you'd like me to sing it with a clothes-peg on my nose?'

'I mean to say . . . '

'You mean to say nothing! When I want you to run this opera, Nurse Phillips, I'll send for you! When I want you to put a hot-water bottle in Desdemona's bed and have me suffocated with an antiseptic pillow, and sing the "Ave Maria" with a eucalyptus lozenge in my mouth, I'll send for you! Meanwhile you can get out! Drains!'

Nurse Phillips got out. Irela threw her powder puff at the closing door. 'She'll kill me . . . she'll kill me!' Then she noticed Pauline.

'I'm sorry, darling,' she said. 'Don't come near me now. I'm not fit for it. It's been an awful evening. Come round for a minute with your young man after it's all over.'

V

Yet, the 'Ave Maria,' as she sang it half an hour later, was a thing of impeccable beauty.

It was too quiet, too radiantly simple to create a sensation. The audience had been bored during the last two acts, and nothing would rouse them again. There were many empty seats, including those recently occupied by the group of irreverent young persons immediately in front. Pauline had never seen such a thing at an Irela night before, and it struck her as an evil omen. Yet all forebodings and all misgivings were wiped out by this exquisite song.

She sang it kneeling, in a dim light. The pose was kind to her figure. The long white robes gave her an appearance of slenderness. The shadowed light softened her features. And when she began to sing, Pauline knew that the little boy's voice, the voice of the cherubin, had come back.

This was the crystal essence of song . . . of a purity that was luminous. It was the innocence of it that was so heart-breaking . . . the pleading innocence . . . the little boy with hands uplifted, and a light on his face that was not of this world.

After the 'Ave Maria,' the brief and tragic end, and the ravings of Othello seemed meaningless. The huge curtain swung down to half-hearted applause.

VI

True to her word, Pauline took Donald round to call on Irela afterwards. Already the dressing-room was tightly packed with people.

It was the first time that Donald had beheld Irela holding court in this manner. It was a revelation to him. For he saw what Pauline had never clearly seen, that all these people who crowded round here were sycophants.

There was, for example, the Irish contingent, sharply divided into two classes, the poor and the rich. The poor were distant relatives, sons and daughters of second and third cousins. They spoke with Irish accents, usually in short and worshipful sentences, and they were very punctilious about their behaviour, especially when there were any titles about. The rich were generally climbing nonentities who used their neighbourly blood as a means of introduction to Irela, hoping that they might be asked to some party where Royalty was present. They did not understand, in the least, why this countrywoman of theirs seemed to be so important, but they read in the paper that she was constantly the intimate of princes and ambassadors, and for that reason they cultivated her. There was no knowing what doors Irela might not open, if she were properly approached.

Then there were the poor English aristocracy, including a quantity of middle-aged women whom Irela, at one time or another, had adopted as travelling companions. They always bore some title, for Irela, when she was making her tours, would never travel with a plain Mrs. or Miss. She had long ago discovered that advance publicity was greatly helped by the paragraphs which appeared in the local papers: 'Madame Irela, by the way, is accompanied by Lady Blank, who is, of course, a sister of the Earl of Dash.' It gave to her programmes a gilt-edged appearance, and insensibly increased the gulf which separated her from the rest of the world.

To-night, they hung around in even larger numbers than usual. The opera season was drawing to its close, and if Irela was to prove of any substantial value to them she must be more firmly attached. This year, they reflected, she seemed to have been a little elusive. And more than one of them thought that Pauline was responsible. Pauline, they whispered, never left Irela alone. She would not let her out of her sight. A cunning little puss, they judged her to be. But a person to be propitiated. So they all made a point of speaking to her, edging their way through the crowd, and asking her all sorts of ridiculous questions to which they had no desire to have an answer.

They all spoke very loudly hoping that Irela would hear them. Thus, though many of their remarks were addressed to Pauline, they did not look at her when they spoke, but stared with assumed rapture at Irela. Their remarks had therefore a *récitatif* quality, which gave to the sound of the chatter a curious unreality.

'Such a privilege for you, dear Miss Joycey,' boomed one of the ex-travelling companions.

'Yes, indeed.'

'When I think of the marvellous tour we made through Canada . . . '

In an even louder voice another ex-travelling companion chimed in, 'But it could not have been more wonderful than our South African adventure. . . . Ah, to think that those days may never come again!'

The two ladies glared at one another, then quickly assumed bright smiles, and riveted their eyes with fierce adoration on Irela.

From this noisy and unattractive gathering Donald at last drew Pauline. There was a reproachful look in Irela's eyes as they went through the door.

VII

'I want my answer now, Pauline.'

She looked up at him. They were sitting in that strange caravanserai, the Savoy Grill. It was long after midnight, and there were not many people there. The waiters, obeying the law which has killed British hospitality, had removed the drinks, and those who supped were confronted with bottles of water.

'I'm being the strong he-man, you see,' he continued. And yet there was weariness in his voice. He did not know why. He had meant to be ardent, possessive, to carry her off her feet. As it was, he was almost yawning. Not that he loved Pauline the less . . . it seemed that there was a blight over everything.

He leant across the table. 'The day after the opera season's over, we get married. Money or no money. Irela or no Irela. Yes or no?'

There was a long pause. Then Pauline said:

'If Irela . . . '

His fist came down on the table. He was really angry now. 'Damn it, Pauline, you'll drive me crazy.'

She started violently. There was fear in her eyes. Quickly she put her hand on his.

'Darling, you didn't let me speak.'

He drew his hand away, and folded his arms. There was a scowl on his face. 'I know what you're going to say.'

'I was going to say "yes."'

'Yes . . . *if* . . . always if . . . '

She spoke very patiently. 'It's a very little "if." It was only if Irela were well . . . if she were not actually ill, I mean.'

He turned round. His expression was no longer angry, only puzzled. 'But she's as strong as a horse.'

'Yes.' She was not looking at him.

'Why, Pauline . . . darling,' and now all the eagerness had come back to his voice. 'Do you realize you've practically accepted me?'

'You don't seem to realize it!' She smiled through her tears.

'But you have. By God, I'll keep you to that. "If she isn't actually sick." Those were your very words. Gee . . . let's have a drink. Damn . . . why don't they have Prohibition in this country so that we'd be able to drink at unreasonable hours?'

'We'll drink to it in water.'

They raised their glasses.

As he gulped the water he suddenly paused. 'Say, there's no catch in this?'

'What d'you mean?'

'I mean Irela hasn't suddenly come out in a rash, or anything?'

She laughed. 'Not that I know of. Why?'

'I wondered why you made that particular condition.'

'It's just a –' she paused for the right word. She did not want to say 'foreboding.' Nor did she want to say 'suspicion.' That would make Donald unhappy. So she evaded the point, and said, lightly, 'I just want to have an absolutely clear conscience, that's all.'

'Pauline, you're a saint.' His eyes were moist. 'Honest . . . you're a saint.' He gripped her hand. 'Why you don't bore me to death I don't know.'

'I may do, one day.'

He shook his head absent-mindedly. He was thinking. 'You've got to fatten that old dame up,' he said.

'What *do* you mean?'

'You've got to see she takes her medicine, and wraps her chest up, and gargles, and is regular in her habits.'

'Nurse Phillips sees to all that.'

'She'd get sick just to spite Nurse Phillips. No, Pauline, it's up to you. . . .'

And thus, with a fanciful cosseting of Irela, Donald entertained her. In his imagination Pauline already belonged to him.

CHAPTER SEVEN

I

PAULINE had not summoned up enough courage to tell Irela about her promise to Donald. She wanted first to be sure that Irela was in a good mood. And nowadays good moods were few and far between.

Not that Irela seemed in any but the best of health. She had already told Campbell that she had no more need of Nurse Phillips, and though he had refused to allow that lady to depart until he made a thorough examination, it looked as though Nurse Phillips would shortly leave them.

But with the apparent return of her vitality, Irela became more irritable than ever. The criticisms of *Othello* had been lukewarm. She was angry . . . actively angry. There was no sign of depression, only of an aggressive energy.

'Oho! Ha, ha! He, he! *Very* funny. Very *funny*!' She seized a paper. '"*Her flawless method, from which she has never swerved, stood her in good stead in this arduous rôle.*" As though I were an old boxer who'd lost his wind but hadn't forgotten his tricks! And here's another one: "*Whatever may be said of her fitness for the rest of the opera, nobody could deny that the 'Ave Maria' was a perfect example of the almost lost art of bel canto legato.*" Those three words are the only Italian that damned critic knows. And the reason he only mentions the "Ave Maria" is because he came in tight in the fourth act. But this is the prettiest of all. "*There was an obvious effort to surmount the high and difficult passages in which the first part of the opera abounds.*" '

She crumpled the papers together. 'Take 'em away . . . away . . . away!' she cried. 'They make me sick!'

Pauline did not realize that all this storm and fury was the sign of an acute nervous tension . . . a tension which was extremely dangerous in view of the high blood pressure with which it was combined. Had she been able to share Irela's thoughts, she would indeed have been anxious.

II

For Irela was now the prey of horrible obsessions.

Sitting there, in that historic boudoir, with its tiny clocks ticking away the dizzy minutes from shells of coral and jade, she brooded over the golden past which had drifted into so drab a present, and seemed to be curdling to so menacing a future. She would sit and sit, occasionally throwing back her head, to stroke her uncertain chin, and as she sat, cross-legged, she would swing her foot backwards and forwards, until the fur-lined shoe slipped from her foot and slid over the parquet flooring. Then she would rise and stamp unevenly across the floor, push her foot into the slipper, and stand, breathing deeply, listening.

Listening to what? To the clocks that ticked, ticked – ticked away the tinsel moments with their tiny hammers? To the slow, sad hum of the London which had once been hers – which might still be hers if only she were wise? Or to the soft, dragging footsteps of the nurse outside, who was cringing down the corridor towards her, bearing an amber-coloured tonic on a tray?

III

Three days after *Othello* Pauline decided to tell Irela that she was going to marry Donald.

It was really Donald who decided it for her. They were dining together again, in a cheap little place in Soho.

'Have you told her yet?'

'No.'

'You've got to tell her to-night, then.'

'Oh . . . Don.'

'*To-night*. See?' He looked at her grimly. 'What sort of mood did you leave her in?'

'Well . . . it wasn't really so bad, I suppose.'

'She's gone to bed, hasn't she?'

'I don't know. She was lying down when I went out. She seemed quite affectionate . . . rather absent-minded. She asked me to be in early.'

'Well, you shall be. Not a minute after eleven. And if she's gone to sleep, you'll wake her up.'

Suddenly she surrendered to his delicious domination.

'Yes, Don . . . yes. . . . I'll do anything you say . . . now and always.'

They stared wide-eyed at each other. They were both trembling. They were both tingling with a beautiful desire. But a mist came over Donald's eyes, and he bent his head.

'These things don't happen,' he whispered, brokenly. 'Life doesn't give away its prizes so easily, Pauline. Or if life gives you a prize, you get run over by a bus when you're carrying it home. God, I love you. God, I'll kill you with love one day.'

He pressed her hand till she could have cried out with pain. But it would have been a happy cry, for she wanted him to hurt her.

At ten minutes to eleven, he left her, a few hundred yards from the house in Charles Street. She wanted to walk alone for a brief space, to calm her nerves.

IV

A dark and icy wind assaulted her as she turned her face towards home. It stung her cheeks, caught at her throat, sealed her lips in a cold caress, tore at her skirts till she felt naked before it. The street was empty, and in spite of the speeding wind, with its thousand echoing laughs, and the noise of its havoc in the roofs and the alleys, she could hear her footsteps, tap, tap, tap over the hard grey pavements. As though she were taking part in some grotesque parade, running the gauntlet of many watching windows, that stared at her with cold, dead eyes.

The street seemed endless. On and on she walked, and the wind caught at her as though it were trying to send her back. It seemed to be hissing some message into her ears . . . some message that it was vital for her to hear. When at last she reached Charles Street, she felt battered and exhausted. But she would not swerve from her purpose.

V

What was that noise?

She stood in the hall, stock still. In her hand was the fur which she had taken from her neck. She had just been going to put it down when that shrill scream had echoed through the house, causing her to start and listen, her bosom heaving.

Was it the wind? It must have been the wind . . . for even this hall, that was normally so quiet and still, was filled with the moaning and the whistling from outside. She wet her lips. Mechanically she dropped the fur on to the settee, and turned to walk upstairs.

Then she stopped. There was the scream again. And now there was no doubt as to its origin . . . it came from Irela's throat, and it was the scream of a woman in desperate alarm.

Pauline caught her breath. Then with a stifled cry she ran upstairs. Her limbs were heavy with the cold, and she clutched at the banisters to steady herself.

In the entrance to the music-room she stopped dead. She had expected to see a scene of violence . . . of robbery or assault. But the room was quiet and dimly lit, and at the far end, Irela stood alone. Her mouth was wide open.

Trembling with a nameless fear, Pauline stepped forward, into the shadow of the great Coromandel screen that stood by the entrance. From here she could see without being seen, hear without being heard. And what she saw and heard appalled her. Like some tortured and vehement priestess invoking a god who heard her not, Irela stood there – her arm outstretched, her face tragic and contorted, her lips wide and taut. The pale and callous firelight flickered around her, and black shadows jutted from floor to ceiling. But all the senses of sight and form were lost in the single sense of sound – the agonized, violent sound which came from her throat.

The whole room seemed to shrivel before that sound. High and shrill, it stabbed the darkness. Pauline, shrinking in the shadows, felt as though she were being physically assaulted, as though she were being cut by a lash of tattered melody – a lash that paused, faltered, and then swept down again with a fierce and cruel bite. And then again – silence – dead, utter silence – and a sense of intolerable pain.

Irela stepped forward. From her hiding-place Pauline could see her profile. She seemed abandoned to some appalling grief. Her eyelids were swollen with tears, her mouth was trembling and agape, her proud chin was sunken in folds of flesh. Her body seemed listless, as though it were not strong enough to support the folds of the yellow satin dressing-gown that hung and curled about her. As she moved slowly over the shining floorway she was as one who advances to the sacrifice. The room resounded to her desperate breathing.

Suddenly her whole poise changed. Her head lifted, her eyes lightened, her hands fluttered aloft. And as she opened her lips, Pauline felt that some obscene wooing was in progress. . . .

The voice came again . . . caressing but cracked. The old lips were twisted to the symbol of love, but they trembled with weariness that weighed them down. The words were words Pauline could not recall. . . . 'Oh bien-aimé, ne sois pas trop tardif!' But they were made hideous by the gasps that accompanied them, and the gestures to which they echoed. For Irela's shoulders were hunched and her hands were crooked . . . the whole pose was a dreadful parody of youthful supplication.

And quickly it was abandoned. Quickly she stood erect again. Now the face was grim, set in an intolerable mask. Anger possessed her. She shook with it. She advanced slowly in Pauline's direction, across the polished floor, her shadow following her.

'Ah – ah – ah!'

She stamped forward. Her hands were rigid as steel. Her face was crimson.

'Ah! Ah!'

Shriller and shriller the voice rose. Now all beauty had flown affrighted. Now all was discord. The room rang with the horror of it.

'Ah!'

It was a hateful, vulgar scream – the scream of a coarse, affronted woman – the scream of a fish-wife – the scream of a harlot. . . .

Pauline rushed forward.

Never, as long as she lives, will Pauline forget those few seconds which followed. She stood there, wide-eyed and trembling, only a few feet from Irela, her hands outstretched in a dumb and pitiful protest. And Irela faced her, tense with fear and hate, like some animal that has been trapped before its kill. . . .

'What are you doing here?'

'You mustn't – you mustn't. . . . '

'Spying, eh?'

'Please . . . darling . . . your voice. . . .'

'My voice is my own, isn't it?' Irela retreated, like a panther before it springs.

Pauline closed her eyes for a second. She suddenly felt unutterably weary – robbed of all vitality – hopeless. . . .

'It's just . . . '

'Just what?'

Then Irela seemed to collapse. She leant against the piano, a grotesque, absurd figure, and with her fat hand she played a chord which sharply echoed through the room. 'You're like all the rest of them,' she said. 'You think I can't do it any more.' She switched back her head and a shrill, hoarse laugh came from her throat. 'Can't do it any more – can't do it any more.' She was suddenly silent. Her head drooped, her lower lip seemed to shoot forward and her eyelids fell together . . . there was a sudden moan, and her fingers strayed sadly into a popular tune to which she sang 'I can't do it any more, any more, do it any more. . . .'

Suddenly the tune stopped. Both her hands were stretched rigidly before her.

'Pauline . . . Pauline . . . my hands . . .'

Pauline ran to her. 'What is it . . . oh, darling . . . what is it?'

In a voice of utter terror, a choked voice, she cried:

'Can't move my hands . . . can't move . . .'

She fell back on to the chair. Her heavy shoulders weighed against Pauline's young arms. Her swollen eyelids fluttered, fluttered. . . .

The hands remained rigid.

PART III

THE LOVER

CHAPTER ONE

I

Nurse Phillips was beginning to feel the strain.

She had been in her element for the brief period when Irela had lain, pale and silent, in her darkened room in Charles Street. Her patient, then, had been powerless to resist her . . . could not refuse her medicine, could not even find the strength to curse her as she bustled round the room, humming her favourite hymns, with their frequent reference to 'anejells.' She could only lie back, following her with eyes that brooded sullenly.

But Irela after these few days of inertia began to recover with a speed which astonished even Dr. Campbell. 'I expected a quick recovery . . . I didn't expect a miracle,' he said, a few days later, allowing her to eat oysters. And this tribute from Campbell was a tribute indeed. For he knew her iron constitution of old. He also knew that her collapse, outwardly alarming, was not of serious organic importance. The ugly phenomenon of the stiffened hands, which had so horrified both Irela and Pauline, was dismissed by him as a nervous reflex, which indeed it was. There was no question of a stroke . . . nor as Irela suggested – (having a penchant for royal diseases) – of apoplexy.

Campbell's diagnosis, in fact, had been so prosaic that Irela resented it. 'High blood pressure, aggravated by over-eating, and brought to a pitch by doing at least six times more than you ought to do at your age. Also, you've got a tooth that's poisoning your blood stream. If you rest, eat what I tell you to, go to the dentist and have that tooth out, and take a dose of salts every morning, you'll be singing better than ever by the summer. If you don't, you'll soon stop singing altogether . . . unless it's with Nurse Phillips' angels.'

The reference to Nurse Phillips had brought on another outburst.

'I won't have that damned woman in the house another minute,' she cried, tugging her lace cap over her forehead.

'Oh, yes, you will,' said Campbell.

'Spying on me!'

'Which is what she's paid to do.'

'And singing hymns like a housemaid who's just been saved.'

'Well, you don't have to pay her for that!'

'Very well, Arthur Campbell, we'll see who gives way first.'

With these ominous words the discussion ended, for the time being. They boded ill for Nurse Phillips.

How ill, she was not to discover till a certain Channel crossing, some two weeks later.

It was the beginning of May, and she, Pauline and Irela were *en route* to Dover in a special compartment. Irela was in a talkative mood.

'It's really marvellous, Pauline darling, how well everything has arranged itself! I only missed four performances . . . of course that was a tragedy, with so many people disappointed, but still it isn't as if they will never be able to hear me again . . . and the season was the most amazing success . . . though naturally any money I make will all be taken by the income-tax man . . . and though I would have adored to do the final performance, it'll have to wait . . . perhaps next year . . . after all, I haven't really given my farewell yet.'

'Next year,' echoed Pauline. She was looking out on to the fields that drifted by . . . fields that were bright with buttercups . . . fields that suddenly disappeared, to be hidden by banks that were misted with early bluebells. And she was wondering if she and Donald would ever walk through such fields together. She had seen hardly anything of him in these past few weeks. Irela had claimed all her attention. A fleeting walk, now and then, through the grey park, under trees still sullen with winter's mood . . . and a single wonderful evening when they had sat together by the fire . . . dreaming. But all these dreams seemed shadowed by the difficulty of life as it had to be lived. Or were the difficulties of her own making? She wondered. All she knew was that she seemed to be going very far away from him, and that her whole being was blighted with a sense of frustration.

Donald, contrary to her expectations, had made no difficulties. He had not tried to hold her to her promise. When he first heard of Irela's collapse he was alone in his own bedroom, and the cursing and kicking had been worked off there. When he again saw Pauline he was reconciled to the fact that their marriage must be postponed.

'But the minute it's safe to leave her . . . '

'I'll come, Don, indeed I'll come. But I can't even tell her about it yet. Campbell says she must have no shocks.'

'Gee . . . and it'll be a shock, all right,' he had said.

And Pauline, listening to Irela in the train, was inclined to agree.

'It was so right of Campbell to suggest Paris,' continued Irela. 'After all, it isn't as if I were really ill, or as if I needed the least attention . . .' and here she cast a hostile glance at Nurse Phillips. 'There's nothing in the least wrong with me really, as anybody but a ridiculous fuss-pots would realize.' She gave a final glare at Nurse Phillips, and then switched back to Pauline. 'It's all nerves, that's what it is. And heavens, if anybody has a right to them, I have. When I think of all I've gone through in this season. However . . .' she checked herself, and a look of childish joy came into her eyes . . . 'Paris will cure all that, Paris! Darling . . . how I long to show you Paris . . . it's going to give me the greatest pleasure . . . to show you the room where I almost starved when I made my début in *Romeo* . . . and the street I used to walk along to take my music lessons. . . .' Here she glared once more at Nurse Phillips. 'Life hasn't always been easy for *me*,' she observed, in sibilant tones. '*I* haven't always travelled in first class carriages, with every luxury! Oh no! Nurse Phillips, if you could spare me just a few inches of the rug . . . thank you so much . . . it's so kind of you . . . I hope I'm not depriving you?'

Nurse Phillips gave her one of her brightest smiles. But there was something artificial about that smile, as though it were wearing a little thin.

II

It was a very rough crossing. Even Pauline, who was a good sailor, had a headache, and a disagreeable feeling of lethargy. But Irela appeared to feel nothing at all. Lying back in her cabin when they were about twenty minutes out to sea, she said:

'Darling, you look pale.'

'Well . . . it's rather rough.'

'Rough? Nonsense! It isn't rough at all. A slight roll, that's all.' As she spoke, a glass which had been standing on the washstand, rattled forward and crashed on the floor.

Pauline smiled. 'It's rather more than a roll,' she said, as she picked it up.

'What can you expect, if you leave glasses lying all over the place? It's nothing at all.' And she settled herself comfortably on the bed, rosy-cheeked and contented.

Then, suddenly a curious gleam came into her eyes.

'Where's Nurse Phillips?'

'I saw her lying on deck – looking rather ill.'

Irela sat up, as though she had heard enchanting news. 'What does she want to be ill for?' she demanded. Her expression was as stern as she could make it, but her voice was jubilant.

'I suppose she's not a good sailor.'

'Really, my dear . . . too ridiculous.' Irela tried to look indignant, but the effort was too great for her. She could not disguise her satisfaction.

'She's a nurse, isn't she?' she continued. 'She's used to seeing the most disgusting sights, and doing the most revolting things. . . . How any *decent* woman can take up nursing beats me . . . how can she possibly pretend to be upset by this? It's pure affectation . . . that's what it is. She's growing slack. Go and tell her to come here.'

'But if she really *is* . . .' ventured Pauline.

'I don't care what she is. She's a nurse, and she's on duty, and I want her.'

'Very well.'

Pauline went out. The minutes passed. Irela began to grow impatient. Then, at last, she arrived.

Irela observed her with the utmost satisfaction. She drooped in the doorway, and her face was a symphony in jade and lavender. A few untidy wisps of hair straggled across her forehead, which was wet with spray. Every detail of her distress delighted Irela. She had seldom felt more at peace with the world.

'What's the matter, Nurse Phillips?' she barked. 'Not feeling well?'

'It's a little rough,' gasped Nurse Phillips. And gulped.

'Rough? Don't be ridiculous. A nice fresh breeze, that's all. You mustn't be affected, Nurse Phillips. I can't bear affectation.'

Nurse Phillips closed her eyes, and leant her head against the door-post.

'Look at me!' continued Irela sharply. 'I'm not pretending to feel sick, am I? I'm not giving myself airs, am I?' Then she snapped, in a very abrupt voice, 'I want a glass of beer and a dry biscuit.'

A look of intense loathing passed over Nurse Phillips' face. She said nothing. She only drooped a little more.

'Did you hear me? A glass of beer . . ' Irela crooned the word with saccharine sweetness . . .'and a nice, dry biscuit!'

Nurse Phillips opened her eyes wide, swallowed quickly, and rushed into the storm outside.

Irela lay back, and smacked her lips. This was divine! A great many old scores were being paid off. She wished they were crossing the Atlantic instead of the Channel. Each time the boat plunged, trembled, remained in a sickly vacuum, and then rolled to one side, she offered a prayer of thanksgiving.

It was a long time before Nurse Phillips returned. When at last she staggered through the doorway it was evident that her agony was in no way abated. In one hand she held a glass of beer which was already half spilt. In the other hand was a plate of biscuits, sodden with spray.

'What are these?' demanded Irela fiercely.

'Bis . . .' whispered Nurse Phillips. 'Bis . . .'

'Bis? What do you mean by "bis"? You're not asking me to sing an encore, are you? Then she took up a biscuit. 'They're not fit to eat! Do you want *me* to be sick?'

Nurse Phillips had never wanted anything more intensely. She would have given up all her chances of singing with the 'anejell hosts' if Irela, at that moment, could have suffered as she was suffering. But she could only shake her head and close her eyes.

Irela was in the seventh heaven. 'It may be a long time before we get to land,' she proclaimed, 'and you might as well stop this affectation at once.'

'Not . . . affec . . .'

'It *is*. The captain isn't sick, is he? I'm not sick, am I? *You're* not sick!'

And at precisely that moment, Nurse Phillips *was*. Quite definitely. All over Irela's coat. After which she lurched outside and sank into a deck-chair.

The cabin resounded with screams that rose above the wind and the rain. Stewards precipitated themselves into the cabin. The coat was removed, shaken, sponged. Irela paced furiously up and down the cabin, planning revenge. But by the time they reached Calais she was herself in a somewhat subdued mood. She had a curious, hot feeling in the head. It really was a very rough crossing.

III

She had engaged a suite at the Hotel Salamander, which stands in the Avenue du Bois, in bosky discretion. The suite consisted of bedrooms for the three of them, a sitting-room for Irela, and a dining-room. It cost ten pounds a day, as Irela constantly reminded them. But her reception was so perfect that she did not worry about the price, just yet.

Dingley met them at the Gare du Nord, with Tremlowe in the background. Dingley's neck was irreproachable. As they drove through the crowded streets Pauline had a thousand exciting impressions, but they were all somewhat blurred by the running monologue which Irela delivered:

'Oh, my dear, what fun . . . look at the little cafés . . . oh! we nearly ran into that man . . . the French are *mad* . . . look at that taxi . . . so amusing, the high note the horns give, don't you think? Like Baba's top notes! Look, there's a café . . . you can drink outside in Paris . . . I adore watching the people . . . and this is the Place Vendôme . . . that's the Crillon . . . terribly vulgar and full of profiteers . . . really, why we aren't killed in this crazy roundabout I don't know . . . do you see the Arc de Triomphe . . . no, darling, straight ahead . . . and there is a lavatory . . . the French are so frank. . . .'

Her eyes gleamed. She turned to Nurse Phillips, prepared to shock her.

'There is a lavatory!' she said loudly, pointing to one.

Nurse Phillips gazed with steely eyes at the Arc de Triomphe. 'Very handsome,' she said.

Irela was baffled. So she held her peace, and they sped up the leafy avenue, swung round the coloured circus that perpetually swirls beneath the arch, and were soon at the hotel.

They were waiting for her. The concierge, the manager, the *maître d'hôtel*, the manageress, the lift man. They surrounded her with raptured homage. She was charmed. It was like a first night. *Such* a good hotel. And when they entered the suite, which blazed with pink roses, she was like an enchanted child. This was the perfect hotel.

Better was to come. The slim, smiling *maître d'hôtel* had another card up his sleeve. He flicked his fingers and a pink page appeared, clad in tight cherry-coloured velvet trousers and a blue satin jacket. He bore an immense basket of yellow orchids, with which he waltzed across the floor, depositing them at Irela's feet.

Irela accomplished a particularly successful laugh. She clasped her hands. 'For me?' she cried.

'If madame will permit.'

'Too beautiful.' Then, in a sharp aside, 'Tremlowe!'

Tremlowe bustled out of the bedroom.

'Put these in water.'

Tremlowe bustled back.

The *maître d'hôtel* now played his ace. He lowered his moist black eyes, his body cringed into an engaging curve, the palms of his hands displayed themselves.

'It is very daring of me, madame, but . . .' and then he paused.

'Not at all,' murmured Irela. 'What is it?' She was quivering with delicious suspense.

The *maître d'hôtel* raised his eyes again in supplication.

'Would it be possible . . . oh, not now . . . but some time . . . for madame,' again the pause, 'to present a *tout*, *tout petit* photograph . . .?'

Instantly Irela was all animation. Indeed he should have one, not in the distant future, but now! Indeed, indeed, this perfect creature, who not only appreciated great art but understood, as he had already indicated, the importance of cauliflower polonaise, should be granted his desire. Drawers were torn open, which had been laboriously arranged by the wretched Tremlowe, trunks were dragged out, cupboards were ransacked, in order to give him the best of all possible photographs. Did he like this – or was the profile – a little, yes – perhaps it was. Or this? Or that? Or the other one taken at Cannes when Caruso had been so tiresome? Or – and here there was a sigh and a flutter of a handkerchief – this quite simple one – taken a year ago, it is true, or perhaps even two or three years . . . he liked it? Perfect! The photograph was laid on the desk, a pen spluttered across it, the *maître d'hôtel* raised and lowered his eyes, departed, and Irela sank back in her chair, saying, 'I told you that this was the only decent hotel in Paris.'

CHAPTER TWO

I

Though it might be an exaggeration to say that it was Paris which caused the beginning of Pauline's revolt from Irela, it is certainly true that very soon after their arrival she began to feel the strain of her position as she had never felt it before.

For now that Irela had no definite occupation to keep her busy, now that there was no business to attend to, no rehearsals, no piles of photographs to sign, time hung heavy on her hands. There were not even the minor distractions of running Charles Street – not that Irela had ever really run it. She had merely put an occasional spoke in the wheel. Now this small pleasure was denied her. She could not put a spoke in the wheels of the Salamander Hotel – they moved too smoothly and too swiftly.

Irela looked around her for some object on which to vent her wrath. She caught the page boy in the cherry-coloured velvet trousers looking through the keyhole on the night after her arrival. This provided her with matter for acrimonious comment for a short time. 'Spying on me!' she cried. 'We've come to a nest of spies! They all spy in Paris.' And for a few days she took to tiptoeing towards her door when she was going out, and suddenly flinging it open so that she lurched forward into the corridor. However, she had no luck, except on one occasion, when she almost knocked down a blameless old French general who was hurrying by in his dressing-gown on the way to his bath. He concluded that she was intoxicated, and complained to the management.

Pauline had, therefore, a hard time of it. Parisian society, which was to have flocked about Irela, according to her own prophecy, held unaccountably aloof. A few composers came. Now and then an ancient nobleman, looking as though he had lost his way, left some flowers. One or two shabby French ladies of the old school arrived from time to time. The British Ambassador called when she was out. One of the Belgian princes came to dinner. There was the usual selection of Irish sycophants. But the sum total of these persons would hardly have constituted a *salon* even if they had all arrived together.

The truth was, of course, that the Paris of Irela's day had long ago ceased to exist. Ever since the war, the fine old French families have been constrained, by economic pressure, to keep themselves to themselves. Even during the war, when Lord Derby was ambassador, the change had begun. Now, it was all different. Irela simply did not know where all her old associates had gone. And even if she had known it is doubtful whether she would have had the energy to search them out.

Nor was this the only reason for the frequent emptiness of the suite at the Hotel Salamander.

The fact was that the name of Irela had ceased to mean very much in Paris.

A horribly embarrassing episode occurred on their very first day. Irela took Pauline down to see the opera-house which had been the scene of so many of her past triumphs. They drew up at the stage door.

'We'll take them by surprise,' cried Irela. 'You see? They're rehearsing *Butterfly*. A dreadful opera – I never sang it. Who is the woman? Sachanetta? What a name! I've never heard of her, but she'll be *too* excited if I come to see her!'

All this was said at the stage door. Irela was about to sail past when a concierge stopped her. He intimated that it was not allowed to pass through to the auditorium.

'Je suis Madame Irela!'

The concierge asked if she was the lady that Signora Sachanetta was expecting about her underclothing.

Irela went purple in the face. Then suddenly she burst out laughing. It was really too droll. Too, too droll. What a story for the papers! 'You must cable it to the *Daily Mail*, darling. They'll adore it. And the French papers too. . . . "Irela stopped at stage door. Mistaken for a laundress!" ' She turned to the concierge. She gave him her card.

'Take that to Signora Sachanetta at once. If she is busy take it to the manager.'

The concierge returned a few moments later. He regretted that Signora Sachanetta had no free seats to offer. And the manager was not in the theatre.

Irela was speechless. She rushed back to the car and told Dingley to drive straight ahead. Then her wrath gradually burst forth. She cursed Signora Sachanetta. She said, with a shrill and mirthless laugh, that she was not at all surprised that somebody was coming to see her about her underclothing because Italians were so disgusting that their underclothing was unspeakable – (a somewhat involved statement which did not seem entirely logical). She added that Italians were all mad, and all offensive, and that if we did not look out Mussolini would be causing another European war. Everything vaguely connected with Italy was subjected to her blistering invective during the next half-hour.

All the same, she ate three helpings of spaghetti for lunch.

II

Irela's temper was, indeed, becoming alarming. There was a touch of lunacy about it which disturbed Pauline gravely. However, no actual crisis yet arrived, for it was upon Nurse Phillips that the wrath was chiefly vented. Pauline, as she witnessed the almost daily scenes of violence which occurred, was completely at a loss to understand why Irela put up with her. Over and over again there were shrill proclamations that Nurse Phillips was 'killing' her, 'poisoning' her, 'driving her insane.' Why keep her then? She was forced to the conclusion that Irela only kept her as a butt for her unbridled temper . . . a temper which seemed to grow more fiery as the days progressed.

Nurse Phillips, after the episode of the Channel crossing, had taken refuge in ~~an~~ ardent spirituality. A certain wild look in her eye might have occasioned doubts on the observer as to how long she could keep this spirituality in full flame. However, she did. And nothing that Irela could do or say appeared to be able to ruffle her.

Brightness had largely disappeared. It flickered out, now and then, but more in the nature of a nervous twitch than a natural or professional ebullience. But in the place of brightness had come a quality which, to Irela, was far more irritating . . . a calm and determined optimism, an unfluctuating beneficence, which had an apparently inexhaustible source. Everything was good in the world to Nurse Phillips. And though she was not a Christian Scientist – such luxuries are not for hospital nurses – there shone over her features the peculiarly maddening complacency of those who dismiss malignant growths (spiritual or physical), as 'error.'

This attitude was very clearly exemplified on one of their first days in Paris when Irela took Pauline to a restaurant in the Bois. A high wind was blowing. Nurse Phillips, for some reason best known to Irela, accompanied them.

They walked round the flower-beds, which were gay with giroflets. Irela snorted, seeing some dandelions, 'Look at all these weeds! You wouldn't see weeds like that in an English garden.'

'I always think weeds are so wonderful,' crooned Nurse Phillips.

'What did you say?' Irela halted, and dug her parasol into the ground.

In a clear and lofty intonation Nurse Phillips continued, 'There are a hundred and fifty-seven varieties of weeds in England. . . .'

'Yes . . . and you're the hundred and fifty-eighth.'

'And they all,' she added, without appearing to have heard Irela, 'they all have their meaning.'

Irela pawed the ground, and champed her lips with anger. 'If I see a weed in *my* garden I know that it means I've got a damned slack gardener. And I'd trouble you not to talk such nonsense, Nurse Phillips.'

But Nurse Phillips only gazed benignantly at an enormous dandelion which reared its head out of a bed of pansies.

'My father,' she said, 'was a botanist. He presented his collection of English weeds to the Ipswich museum on his decease.'

'He did *what?*'

Nurse Phillips reiterated the information that her father had 'presented his collection of English weeds to the Ipswich museum on his decease.' It is a difficult sentence to achieve, on any occasion, still more difficult in a high wind, confronted by a hostile *prima donna.* However, Nurse Phillips achieved it.

'He *would*!' retorted Irela. It was not a very brilliant reply, but it was the best she could manage for the moment.

They continued their promenade. Irela stamped on in front, prodding with her parasol any plant which displeased her, sublimely unconscious of the unfavourable impression she was making upon the other visitors to the gardens. They passed under a bower of clematis. Pauline passed to touch a spray of the lovely, lilting blossom. An earwig fell on to her sleeve. She brushed it off.

Irela snapped, 'Don't fiddle with the plants, darling. You're always sniffing things. One day you'll get an earwig up your nose.'

'Poor little earwig!' breathed Nurse Phillips. There was a rapt look on her face.

'What are you saying "poor little earwig" for?' snarled Irela. And she spitefully dug her heel upon the insect . . . dug it with such force that she nearly twisted her ankle.

'Even earwigs have their uses,' beamed Nurse Phillips.

'Yes . . . to get in *your* ears and wake you up!' replied Irela. And stamped on again.

Pauline followed her in a dream. Above her swung the pale feathers of the laburnum, streaking the grey-blue sky with gold. All around was the pink profusion of the clematis, proffering its trembling stars. Rich and lush at her feet were the wallflowers, as though they had been spread by the generous brush of a modern painter. The gusts of wind carried their heavy essence sharply to her nostrils . . . she was assailed by an intolerable sweetness, yet she walked as though she were chained. Almost could she hear the clank of chains about her in a metallic rhythm as the absurd conversation of Irela and Nurse Phillips prolonged itself:

'Look at that filthy modern villa they're putting up over there.' Irela pointed to a red-brick erection with a magenta roof that reared itself through the heavy green of the chestnut trees.

'I didn't notice it,' said Nurse Phillips.

Irela looked over her shoulder. 'I wasn't speaking to you.' Then, as nobody made any reply, she added, 'Why didn't you notice it?'

Nurse Phillips, with the expression of one who sees visions of 'anejell' hosts within a stone's throw said, 'I try never to look at unbeautiful things.'

'What?' Irela champed again. 'Did you hear what she said, Pauline? She tries never to look at unbeautiful things! Well, let me tell you, Nurse Phillips, that you'll very soon have to be looking at my stomach, whether you like it or not! I've got a pain in it, and I know why.'

To which Nurse Phillips replied, in tones of intense spirituality, 'So do I.'

Irela started. 'Yes!' she cried. 'Another of your over-doses of that filthy medicine!'

'Oh no!' crooned Nurse Phillips. 'Just too much spaghetti, as usual.'

To which there was no possible reply. Pauline wondered if Nurse Phillips was unbreakable.

And she wondered too if she herself was unbreakable – asked herself how long she would be able to stand it all. It was the first time she had ever put the question into words. And even though the words were unspoken, the fact that they echoed through her head made her realize that a crisis was impending.

III

It came the next day, with a letter from Donald.

Half Moon Street, W. 1, *May 3rd.*

Darling Pauline,

How are you, sweet? Do you love me, you blessed thing? Are you being faithful to me or are you bouncing about on the knees of a lot of amateur Napoleons? I'm being faithful to you, all right, in spite of the housemaid, who follows me about with a wistful expression and tells me she'd do anything for me. Jealous, darling? Please say you are. I'm jealous of everything that touches you, animal, vegetable, or mineral.

Listen.

You and I are going to the South of France at the end of the month. May twenty-third, to be precise.

Please don't argue. I thought I'd better just put it down in black and white so that you'd be able to recover your breath before I begin explaining ways and means. We're going. *See? If I had you any closer I'd take you by the neck and shake the life out of you till you said 'Yes.'*

This is how it's going to be done. I've managed to save a little money. I got a scoop for the Clarion *– I'll tell you about that in a minute. Anyway, I've got a* *hundred pounds and it's gone right in the bank and it isn't going to be touched till I give it to you on the train in Paris. You can take charge of it. All I shall want is a franc now and then to buy you a rose. Hell, I love you.*

This isn't, by the way, an abduction. I don't guarantee that you won't be abduced, or whatever the word is, one day. But I've got a sister coming along. Sister Jane, if you don't object to the name. You'll fall for her. Pauline – she's a peach. Same lovely features as me, but with a nicer soul. She's a buyer for Macy's department store in New York, and she's coming over to look for fabrics and things. She's got to go to Paris middle of May, and she'll be free from the 20th for ten days. She knows all about you – in fact, she's probably gotten sick of hearing your name. Hell, I love you.

So there you are. What d'you say about it? What? *Now look here, it's no use rolling those baby eyes at me. You're coming. See?* What? *What's that about Irela? If I hear you mention that old . . . pardon me while I fill my fountain pen with purple ink. Seriously, honey, you've got to break away from that spell, sooner or later. It* is *a spell – like an enchantment. I know there's been an excuse, and a damned good excuse, on each of the times when she's put a spoke in our wheels in the past. For all I know, she mayn't have put a spoke in our wheels at all – it may just have been Fate. All I say is, if she has that sort of effect on* our *Fate, you've got to escape from her. I know you're as loyal as hell, but she hasn't got an exclusive claim on your loyalty, my angel. She* can *let you go for a week. She* will.

Oh . . . if you knew what this meant to me. May in *the south of France! We'll take tickets to Monte Carlo, and wake up early in the morning – we get to Marseilles at about eight – and we'll have our coffee and when the train stops at any station we like the look of, we'll just get out, and sit on our suitcases on the platform, and laugh. And it'll be blazing hot, and gee . . . the flowers! We'll find some little hotel by the sea, and we'll park Sister Jane in a dark corner, and then I'll put my arms round you and . . .* (Here a long sentence was laboriously crossed out.) *It's all right. Don't take any notice of that mess. I didn't say anything a gentleman shouldn't. Just something that might have made you a bit too Ritzy, that's all. Also there was a bit about the blue mountains and the sunset, and that didn't sound too good.*

You'll come, darling, won't you? You will? *Gee, that's wonderful. That's great. And now that you've agreed, you've got to promise that* nothing *will stop you – not even if Irela gets stuck in a drain and wants you to pull her out, not even if Irela gets locked in the attic and you're the only person who's got the key, not even if that old chauffeur's neck turns purple with large blue spots on it, not even if Irela screams and yells arpeggios of abuse . . . damn it, why am I talking about Irela when I only want to talk about you? I never meant to – she just seemed to fall across the page, like a shadow. . . .*

Now, put on your sweetest smile and your most determined expression, take a double brandy, and go in and tell her what you've decided to do. Don't take no for an answer. Tell her that if she doesn't let you I shall come and assault her. No. Don't tell her that. She'd probably like it – a handsome chap like me. Tell her *that if she doesn't let you, you'll leave her for good. You'll kill her. You'll kill yourself . . . anything. Tell her Spring's in the air, and the birds are mating. No, don't tell her that, 'cos she'd think we weren't going to be moral, and oh hell, we'll be moral all right. Anyway, tell her you're* coming!

I love you. I love you. I love you. In case you didn't hear, I'd like you to know that I LOVE YOU.

Donald.

By the way, the Clarion *scoop was pretty good. Queen of Bosnia on top of a bus. Heard she went for bus drives, noticed she always took the same bus, stalked her a little, observed profile of bus conductor, swell profile and a naughty twinkle in his eye, and oh boy, the love look in* her *eyes when she's paying him the penny! Don't call me a cad. I wouldn't have done it if she hadn't been the cruellest woman in Europe. I could tell you things about that dame. . . .*

By the way, did I, by any chance, mention the fact that I love you?

IV

Pauline put down Donald's letter and stared straight in front of her. She felt wildly happy, and terribly afraid. Happy because of the adoration which he had laid at her feet, afraid because the idea seemed so fantastic, so incredible. Would Irela ever consent? Would she consider it, even for a moment? And if she would not, what was Pauline to do? Was it to be a choice between Donald and Irela? And if she chose Donald, and if Irela sent her away, what would happen – how could she live? And was she even certain that she would be strong enough to choose Donald?

She put her hand over her eyes. 'Oh, he's right,' she said to herself. 'He's absolutely right. I *am* under a spell. It *is* like an enchantment. And it isn't only Irela, it isn't always her fault. Fate seems to fight against me – as though some force outside us were unwilling that we should ever come together.'

She pulled herself up with a start. Here she was already, prophesying failure, assuming that Donald's plan was bound to fall through. This would never do, this passive attitude. She glanced through his letter again, to give her strength. As she read it for the second time she realized that behind the playful words there was a firm and almost violent purpose. If she failed Donald this time, there was no knowing what might happen . . . she might lose him for ever. She must *not* fail him, she must be strong. He was absolutely right in all his arguments. It would be ridiculous, too ridiculous, if Irela stood in her way this time. She could not be so cruel, so perverse.

What was it that Donald had told her to do? She read from the letter, 'Now, put on your sweetest smile and your most determined expression, take a double brandy and go in and tell her.' She did smile, very sweetly, when she read that, though her expression was still far from determined. And she said to herself, 'I *will* have a little brandy . . . it always makes me feel warm and exhilarated. What's more, I'll have it *now.* And then I'll go straight in to Irela and get it over.'

She tiptoed to the dining-room. There, on the sideboard was the brandy – Biscuit Dubonnet 1870 – in a nice bottle with a faded label. Gingerly she poured herself out a liqueur glass. As she lifted it to her lips she paused. Was that somebody coming? What on earth would Irela say if she discovered her drinking brandy at this time of the afternoon? She would think she had gone quite mad. She gulped it down quickly, repressed a sneeze, listened again. There was nothing. The only sound came from the wind in the shutters.

There! That was better. A warm glow pervaded her. She felt far more optimistic about the whole business. Perhaps another brandy? Perhaps that would make assurance doubly sure? 'Assurance doubly sure.' As she whispered that phrase to herself she quickly decided that she would *not* have another brandy. 'Assurance doubly sure.' An extremely difficult phrase to pronounce. However, she could pronounce it. This was therefore the exact psychological moment at which to approach Irela. While the warm glow still persisted, and before she found any difficulty in pronouncing 'Assurance doubly sure.' Not that this phrase was likely to play any very prominent part in their conversation.

She walked firmly down the corridor and knocked at Irela's door.

'Entrez!'

She went in. Irela was lying on a chaise-longue.

She was wearing her tortoiseshell spectacles, and a book was reposing on her lap. Over her shoulders was a pale pink shawl of delicately knitted wool. She looked, in this light, like a comfortable, amiable old lady.

'What is it, darling?'

Pauline looked at the letter in her hand. Before she had time to speak Irela said, 'Shut the door, darling.'

She shut it.

'Is it stuffy in here?' said Irela.

'Perhaps . . . just a little. . . .'

'Then would you open the window? No. Not there. At the top. No. Don't pull that cord, silly. The other one. Oh dear – I suppose I shall have to do it myself. Ah – you've got it at last. You *must* learn to manage these French windows, darling. They're really simplicity itself.'

All this was delivered in the most amiable tones. Pauline sat down on the end of the chaise-longue. Again she was about to speak, when Irela said:

'Don't you think there's a draught?'

'I don't feel one.'

'Oh but, my dear, there *is*. Quite definitely. I'm afraid we'll have to shut the window again. No. I know what. Just shut it half-way and then we'll put the screen round the chaise-longue. No, silly, only half-way. Oh, dear! Now it's stuck. You mustn't *tug* at the string so. It's perfectly simple. All you have to do is just to pull, quite gently, and then it slides up. If you tug it, it's bound to stick. Really, my dear, what *are* you doing? I never have the least trouble. *There!* Now for heaven's sake, leave it. Only draw down the blind first, for a minute, because the sun's in my eyes. No. Not *right* down. We don't want to sit in the dark. No . . . just a little bit higher. What? It won't stay in that position? Well, tie it, then. No, silly, there's a knob on the right. All you have to do is . . . ah! that's got it. Now do leave it *alone*.'

Again Pauline returned to the chaise-longue. Irela looked at her reproachfully. 'I thought we were going to have the screen,' she said, 'to keep me from the draught?'

'Oh – of course.'

Pauline went to fetch it. 'I think your mind's wandering a little, darling,' said Irela.

Wandering! Pauline's mind was wandering indeed. Knobs, screws, blinds, cords, draughts, screens! She had come in, full of a fiery purpose, and now she felt like a rather incompetent housemaid. Oh dear . . . the spell was working again, the enchantment. Yet, why should one use such magic words for so trivial an occasion? Spell! There was nothing uncanny in having to pull down a blind for a fussy old woman. And yet, in some way, it was uncanny. She could no more think of refusing to obey Irela, as she lay there, than she could think of insulting the Queen of England at one of Her Majesty's courts. Yes, it was uncanny, this sense of royalty that pervaded the shadowed room. And as she moved the heavy screen across, her hands were trembling violently.

'Be careful, darling, you'll upset it. No, you see, it's caught in the rug. No, darling, lift the *other* end. Do look where you're going, you nearly upset that vase. What? You've pinched your fingers? Well really, there wasn't any need to do *that*. Not the least need. You shouldn't hold it so clumsily. No, more round to this side. Do be careful, darling, or the whole thing'll fall down. Why don't you lift it? Oh really – *do* use your brains, dearest. You know perfectly well that it doesn't fold out that way. Now *leave* it. No, it's perfectly all right. Of course it's in the right place! Surely *I* ought to know whether I feel a draught or not. No, it should *not* be nearer. We've got it right at last. Do, for heaven's sake, let us have a moment's peace!'

All this, again, in the most amiable tones.

Once more Pauline sat down.

'Have you been out, darling? How well you look! Such bright eyes!'

'No. I haven't been out.'

'Oh dear . . . what a pity. I thought you might have some news for me. I get so dull, lying here all alone.'

'I have some news, as a matter of fact.'

'No! Tell me!'

Pauline produced the letter. Now, come what may, she would state her case.

'Just a moment, darling.' Irela appeared not to have noticed the letter and to have forgotten all about the approaching news. 'I think the door could be open, just a tiny bit, now that we've got the screen.'

Like an automaton, Pauline rose and opened it. 'No. Not as much as that, or we shall be blown out of the room. Just about a foot. Like that. Put a chair against it. No, darling, that's no use, you'll have to put something the other side too. What? Well, there are plenty of chairs in the dining-room, aren't there? There . . . that's better. Just a minute, though. It'll rattle against the backs of the chairs. Put something in between. *Darling!* Not that lovely brocade. Really . . . that's a museum piece . . . you can't go stuffing it up against the door like that . . . no, anything. What? Well, there must be lots of things, if you'd only use your eyes. Take that little cushion . . . no, not the *petit point*, take the one I use in the car . . . and for the other one you can use the rug over the sofa. There! we've got it at last. Aren't we clever? I feel quite comfortable now, and I don't think there's a sign of a draught.'

Pauline returned and sat down.

'Oh, but your news!' cried Irela. 'Why don't you tell me what your news is?'

Before any further interruptions could be suggested, Pauline stammered, 'I've had a letter from Donald.'

'Oh!' Irela looked like a disappointed child. 'Is that all?'

'It's rather an important letter.'

'Is it? Why?' She sounded acutely bored.

'He wants me to go away with him . . . just for a week . . . with him and his sister.'

'Really!' Pauline dared not look at her. It was as well that she did not. Irela's face wore none too pretty an expression at that moment.

'Really!' she repeated. There was a sneer in her voice and she rolled the 'r' ironically. 'And what is to become of me, while you're away?'

'That's what I wanted to discuss.' Pauline, try as she might, could not prevent her voice from trembling.

'Is there anything to discuss?'

Pauline raised her head. She looked at Irela piteously. Anything to discuss! When one is in love . . . so deeply in love . . . and when the way is open! Perhaps there was something in her expression which caused Irela to pause, something reminded her of a light that may have shone in her own eyes, many years ago. For she looked away quickly, snatched her book, hunched her shoulders, drew in her feet, and pretended to read.

For a moment there was silence. Then, still holding the book in front of her eyes, she snapped, 'Do as you please.'

'It would be only for a week.' Pauline's voice was very faint.

'I said, do as you please.'

Again, silence. Irela ground her teeth together. Her passionate sense of possession – the strongest motive in her life – had been outraged. She did not care whether Pauline was with her or not – no, perhaps that was not quite accurate – she would miss her dreadfully, even for a week. What she *did* care about, and care most bitterly, was the fact that

Pauline was to be shared with someone else, someone who loved her, and whom she loved.

'You're angry.' Pauline stared fiercely at the carpet. But she only saw a blurred, swimming pattern.

'Oh, no!' snorted Irela. 'Not in the least!'

'Only for a week,' whispered Pauline.

'What did you say?' snapped Irela. She had heard perfectly well, but she wanted to embarrass Pauline, she longed to confuse her, distract her, humble her. 'What did you say? Can't you speak up?'

Pauline repeated her remark.

'*Only* a week!' echoed Irela. 'That's very amusing. Ha! Ha! *Only* a week! And may I ask what I'm to do? In the very middle of the season? Completely alone in Paris?' She spoke as though she were a young homeless girl from the country about to be suddenly deserted in Montmartre at midnight. 'Who, for example, is going to attend to my correspondence?'

'There wouldn't be so very much of it . . . I'd work all night when I got back.'

'Not so very much of it!' This seemed to Irela like a veiled attack upon her popularity with the public. 'Why, look what came by the very last post!' She waved vaguely in the direction of the escritoire.

Pauline walked over to it. She picked up two letters. Somehow the sight of those two letters changed her mood, in a moment, from a miserable terror to a sullen anger. She said, 'There are two letters. One is a circular asking you to an art exhibition, the other is a bill.'

Irela, to save her face, clutched fiercely at the word 'bill.'

'Another bill!' she cried. 'I'm snowed under with bills.' Then, abruptly, 'I suppose you want me to pay your fare.'

'I want nothing of the sort.' Pauline spoke very sharply indeed.

'Oh I *see*!' crooned Irela, with affected sweetness. '*He's* going to do the paying, is he? He's come into money, I suppose?'

'Would you mind not discussing him?'

'Would I mind *what*?' blazed Irela. She struggled up in her chair with more energy than grace. 'Would I mind *what*?'

'I think you heard what I said.'

'Yes. And I'll trouble you to hear what *I* say. . . .'

What might have happened then – to what appalling lengths might this conflict have led them, nobody will ever know. For, as they sat there, staring at each other, there was a knock at the door. They both started violently.

'Qui est là?'

'Tremlowe, m'lady.'

Irela darted a final angry glance at Pauline. 'Come in.'

Tremlowe came in. She bore a telegram on a silver tray. Irela snatched it. 'You needn't wait.' Tremlowe went out, casting a mournfully sympathetic glance at Pauline as she closed the door.

'My spectacles,' snapped Irela.

Pauline was hot with anger. She longed to hurt Irela – yes – to hurt her.

She said, 'If you aren't able to read it, I'll read it for you.'

Irela gasped. This was an insult. Her hands quivered with rage. This was mutiny. She said in a hoarse voice, 'I prefer to read it myself. My spectacles, please!'

Pauline, who had got far beyond the trembling stage, said, 'They are on the table by your side.'

Irela stared at her. At any moment she felt she might explode. Then she put out her hand to the table, so violently that the spectacles fell to the floor. She looked at Pauline again, mutely commanding her to pick them up. Pauline looked away.

'No. No. No!' Pauline muttered to herself. 'I will not pick up the spectacles. Not even to save my life will I pick up the spectacles. Not if the President of the French Republic offers me eight thousand legions of honour will I pick up the spectacles. Not if the Préfet de Police marches into the room with nine hundred and forty thousand intoxicated gendarmes will I pick up the spectacles. I will not-not-not pick-pick-pick up-up-up the-the-the spectacles-spectacles-*spectacles*!'

Small, white, icily aloof she sat there. And then, not by sight nor by sound, but by instinct, she was conscious that Irela, with a snort, had bent down and picked up the spectacles. Conscious, too, of Irela's voice saying, in its most fearsome accents, 'Will you please be good enough to leave the room? When you have recovered your temper and your manners, you may return.'

V

Pauline sat down at the little desk in her room and wrote to Donald.

Darling,

The situation is rapidly becoming impossible. I'll come with you whatever happens.

We have just had a terrible row . . . the first row we ever had. I don't really know what it was all about, but I went in to tell her about your scheme, and she said hateful things, and then she asked me to pick up her spectacles, and I wouldn't. It all sounds too silly for words, but it was actually rather frightening. I still feel very shaky, which accounts for this wobbly handwriting, and I have locked the door in case. . . . What we should have done to each other if Tremlowe hadn't come in with a telegram, just at the crucial moment, I can't imagine.

I will go with you whatever happens. *I haven't told her about the marriage yet, but I shall find a time. Even if I don't, we can get married in the South and present her with a* fait accompli. *After what has happened to-day one would think that she would never want to see me again, but the awful thing about it all is that she* does *love me, and that I do understand her, and have, even now, so much pity for her. And we must never forget,* *darling, that if it had not been for her we should never have met.*

Here I am again, making excuses for her, while my hand is still trembling with anger. But I feel I'm a different person now, Don . . . from now on. I feel life is going by so quickly all the time, and that I would rather have a few days of life with you than an eternity without you.

I wish I could write as prettily as you do. You know how to put yourself on paper, I can't. Besides my brain is wandering . . . and all the time that I'm trying to write sensible things and make plans, I'm framing ridiculous, indignant replies to some of the accusations Irela hurled at me.

You don't love me any more than I love you. Bless you, darling. I wish so much that you were here.

Let me know all about dates and tickets. I shall buy a map to-morrow.

My love always.

Pauline.

VI

Pauline had only just laid down her pen when there was a knock on the door, and Irela's voice outside, crying, 'Darling!'

She put the letter quickly under the blotting-pad. 'Yes?'

'May I come in?'

Pauline paused. This was extraordinary. For Irela's voice was neither angry nor pleading. It was merely bright . . . with a hint of archness.

She walked to the door and opened it.

Irela bustled in, smiling. She waved the telegram which was in her hand, and as she sat on the bed, she broke into a high laugh.

'*What* cross-patches we were! Like two old cats! Darling . . . we must never be so silly.'

'No.' Pauline spoke tonelessly. She stared out of the window.

'You're not *still* angry, are you??' There was genuine surprise in Irela's voice.

'I was a little . . . hurt.'

'Oh, my *dear* . . . you mustn't take these things so seriously.'

Pauline turned to her. 'You don't seem to realize that I was in earnest.'

'But of course . . . of course I realize.'

'Then . . . what about it?'

'You must go,' cried Irela eagerly. 'Naturally, you must go.'

'Oh!' Pauline was so surprised that she could think of nothing else to say.

'Well . . . aren't you glad?'

'Yes.' Then she added hastily, 'Thank you very much.'

'You see,' said Irela, 'it all fits in perfectly.'

'Fits in?'

'Oh, I forgot . . . this telegram . . . I hadn't told you. It's from somebody who . . .' she paused, and sighed and looked down at the carpet.

'Yes?'

Irela giggled, and then winked portentously.

'Never mind,' she said mysteriously. 'It's from somebody who means a great deal to me . . . somebody whom I haven't seen for ten years. And to tell you the truth, darling, I shan't mind if you are out of the way for just a little while. . . .'

Pauline stared at her. Wonders, she felt, would never cease, as long as Irela was about.

CHAPTER THREE

I

IRELA's telegram gave Pauline a great deal to think about. Though its contents had not been divulged to her, she naturally concluded that it was to announce someone's arrival. And Irela's mysterious hints had left no doubt that the 'someone' was a man.

Who is he? Where is he? Was he already here? And would she ever see him?

Pauline instinctively shrank from asking herself this last question. There was something frightening in the thought of Irela as a woman in love. Yet she could not help asking it. There were so many signs – strange, disturbing signs. Fascinated, Pauline found herself watching Irela . . . her comings and her goings. She was consumed with curiosity. And yet she dreaded the idea of finding out.

Irela had never spoken to her of any lovers. That there had been many, rumour often whispered, but Pauline knew Irela well enough to guess that rumour lied. Her voice alone was proof enough of that. It was the very breath of chastity. A dissolute woman could not have sung as she sang.

Yet, might not a voice lie? Once she had hinted at this question to Kober, before his total estrangement from them, and his reply, though illuminating, was not entirely satisfactory.

'I always thought her affairs rather comic,' he said.

'But what do you mean by that word . . . affairs?'

'Nothing very much. Nothing certainly that could be quoted in a divorce court. Ah! I see you're relieved. Surprised, too? Eh? Yes . . . I suppose it is surprising, considering how much Irela eats. Women with keen appetites for food usually have keen appetites for other things. Irela hadn't . . . at least as far as I know, though naturally she did her utmost, as a self-respecting prima donna, to persuade the public that she had quantities of lovers. For instance, there was a boy called Arthur Clarke, who wrote poetic dramas, which was a pity, because he was a pretty boy who ought to have done nothing. He was like a flute *obbligato* – as sweet and as meaningless. And there was Tori, who was a sculptor in California, until he met Irela, when he threw down his tools at her feet, and followed her for three years. I expect he wished he'd kept his tools to throw at her head when the time came for him to go. And Rommel, an Austrian millionaire. Her affair with him was a series of violent *récitatifs*. They used to stand at opposite ends of the room and declaim abuse at each other. But there was only one man who played the part of a love *motif*, drifting from the first act to the last. And in the same way that one waits, in an opera, for that *motif* to steal across the footlights, so I am waiting now, wondering if he will come back into Irela's life. . . ,

But Kober would never tell her who he was.

Pauline now began to scrutinize Irela's entourage much more closely than she had ever done before. Now that the season was more advanced, there were great comings and goings in the hotel, and the *salon* seemed filled with a tinkling of bells – the telephone bell that announced the arrival of a caller downstairs, the tiny silver peal of Irela's bell as she rang for Tremlowe to be in readiness, the brazen bark of the bell on the door leading to the vestibule. Most of these callers were greeted by Irela with such demonstrations of affection that the onlooker would have been excused for imagining that they all played, or were about to play, a part of passionate importance in her life. And yet. . . .

It was not till the arrival of Felix Degrasse that Pauline felt she had more than a casual reason for her suspicions. He was welcomed by Irela with such shrill screams, by such a flurry of outstretched arms, such a breathless fusillade of laughs, cackles, sighs, and protestations . . . and he himself appeared so drunkenly delighted to see her, and threw so vast a bouquet of orchids at her feet, that Pauline felt now, surely, this must be the man. She began to study him carefully.

Felix was fifty-eight, but he looked ten years younger. He was a charming amateur of music, and had written several of the most popular songs in Irela's repertoire. In his youth he had been almost suspiciously handsome. Any suspicions, however, that may have been aroused were rendered negative by his great wealth. He was the son of a French banker, who had married, in rapid succession, the widows of three American millionaires. All the money from these sources had come to him. He spent it in ways best known to himself.

Felix was filled with those appalling high spirits which, before the war, took the place of the rich and strange society which buzzed about the late King Edward. Of all the 'societies' which have ever passed, in futile pageantry, through the pages of history, Pauline felt that the Edwardian must have been the most vulgar. It was a fat age. Fat beauties were the vogue, fat meals were essential, and fat Jews financed fatter Gentiles in order to pay for the dubious privilege of a fat week-end in the same house as a fat monarch. In the midst of so much fatty degeneration, it was hardly to be expected that any keen exercise of the intellect should have been popular . . . even if there had been the desire, the achievement would have been frustrated by the women's stays and the men's stomachs. And so the practical joke – that last despairing twitch of a degraded comic spirit – was the symbol of the age's humour.

Felix was – to use a dreary phrase – 'a confirmed practical joker.' No man had tickled Edwardian obesity to greater effect. Many duchesses had breathlessly regretted the iron grip of their corsets at some exquisite sally of his invention – something really delicious, such as putting a rubber attachment under a soup plate, and pressing a bulb so that the soup is upset – or, in even happier taste, the application of a German freezing mixture to the seats of the ladies' chairs at a dinner, causing every female in the neighbourhood to be paralysed in the hind-quarters for nearly half an hour. One would have thought that this prank, to a generation of sensualists, would have had its drawbacks. But no, it was among the most successful of all Felix's little jokes, perhaps by reason of its violent contrast in providing a chill for portions which were usually well warmed. It was not till the advent of the war that the once frozen ladies, having recalled that the mixture was only obtainable in Berlin, changed their regret to resentment, and talked about the disgusting brutality of the German mind.

On the very first day of his arrival, Felix began to exercise his talents. Irela was out, and Pauline had never seen him before. She was therefore considerably surprised, and not a little alarmed, when an immaculate, middle-aged man propelled himself into the room behind a blaze of yellow orchids and said, in a high, effeminate voice, 'Quick, quick, mademoiselle, where is the bedroom?'

It needed Tremlowe's sly assurance that Mr. Degrasse was 'one of 'er ladyship's *very* oldest friends' to convince her that she really ought to show him to Irela's bedroom. And when they reached it, she began to regret that she had done so. For he rushed to the bed, babbling nonsense in French and English and German, and proceeded to pull back the sheets and make an apple-pie bed, turning now and then to Pauline and winking at her, and throwing up his hands and saying 'La! la!' Shades of Edwardian sportiveness! In how many lofty bedrooms, overlooking how many broad acres, had Felix, in those distant days, made apple-pie beds? And in how many of those beds had he brought the joke to its logical conclusion, by laying his own accomplished body upon them?

'Are you sure that Madame Irela . . .' Pauline paused, uncertain.

'Yes, yes, yes?' He twittered at her.

'Are you sure that she won't be angry?'

He doubled up with mirth. 'Oh – la! la!' he cried. 'The divine one . . . angry with *me* . . . oh – la! la!' And then he drew from his pocket a large tin. He took off the lid. It was blacking. 'Ceci pour le water closet!' he cried. 'La! la!' And again burst into high, fluttering laughter.

Pauline did not know whether to be shocked or amused. She was unaware that she was witnessing a lingering survival of the great aristocratic tradition of the Edwardians. She did not know that this sort of thing was one of the most gracious manifestations of that leisured age. All she knew was that a very odd, highly perfumed French gentleman was prancing round Irela's bed with a tin of blacking in his pocket, making the most outspoken references to objects which, in these coarser days, are more used and less discussed.

The bed was made. He leapt in the air with delight, and clapped his hands. He swished the counterpane back to its original position, patted it archly with two fingers of his left hand, and cried, 'La! la! She will like it, yes? She will put her foot through it, yes?' Pauline bewildered, said 'yes.' To any less singular character she would have said a very emphatic 'No.' But the sight of Tremlowe's face – beaming in the doorway – (That Monsieur Degrasse, he is a *one*!) reassured her.

He rushed off, accompanied by a giggling and ecstatic Tremlowe, to the bathroom, to make use of his tin of blacking. He had only just finished his job when Irela returned. She was in a bad temper. Her afternoon had been very unsatisfactory. She had eaten a boring lunch with a lot of people who did not seem to realize her importance. She had been unable to buy the Louis Quinze snuff-box over which she had been haggling for days. To crown it all, Dingley's neck was blazing red. She was prepared to be extremely snappy. Then in the vestibule, she pricked up her ears, heard Felix's laugh, and instantly the clouds were banished. She darted into the room – there were embraces, shrieks, catcalls – Pauline's head reeled with the flurry of it all.

He stayed to dinner. They quietened down a little. After dinner she sang – softly, vaguely, but with astonishing sweetness, to his accompaniment. When he had gone, and she kissed Pauline goodnight, there were tears in her eyes.

Pauline sat by the fire, wondering. Could this be the man? This curious, faded *flâneur?* This elegant obscenity? Yes, she was bound to admit that he was elegant. There was a real affection there too, and in his day he must have been beautiful. She began to dream of a love affair between them – long ago – when her voice had been at its loveliest, and he had been like a young god – when they had driven through the Bois together . . . through the scented spring nights . . . as she and Donald might be driving now. . . .

Then, suddenly, she was rudely awakened from these reveries. Shrill screams came from the bathroom. 'Oh! Oh! Oh! Oh!' It was Irela's voice. Pauline sprang to her feet. The blacking! She had sat upon the blacking! 'Oh! Oh! Oh!' she cried again. Was she angry? Pleased? Heavens, what was to be done?

She had not long to wait. Irela appeared in the doorway, staggering with laughter. She was so breathlessly amused that she could only cry, 'Felix! Felix . . . look what Felix has done!' She stood there tottering, pointing a shaking arm to indicate the indelicate object upon which she had sat.

Pauline tried – oh, how hard she tried – to laugh. She managed a very creditable imitation. Fortunately, Irela was so convulsed herself that she could pay little attention to what Pauline might or might not be doing. Besides, as soon as the blacking had been removed, Irela went back to her bedroom, from which there instantly echoed more shrieks, as she discovered the apple-pie bed. This was, indeed, too much for her. She felt so weak with laughter that she must come and sit down for a little while, with Pauline by the fire, to calm herself.

'Oh dear, oh dear. . . .' She sighed, wiping·the happy tears from her eyes, 'He's made me feel young again.'

Pauline twisted her lips to a desperate smile which gave, she trusted, the appearance of spontaneity.

'Nobody has spirits like that nowadays,' reflected Irela. 'There's nobody like Felix. Oh my dear, if you only *knew* how beautiful he used to be. He's not beautiful any more. But just as funny – don't you think?'

Pauline agreed with her that nobody could be funnier.

'And he never stops. Never! He's always the same. If it isn't an apple-pie bed, it's a bouquet with a frog in it, or a stink bomb or something. He's absolutely irresistible! When I think of the times we used to have. . . .'

She trailed off into reminiscences that lasted till nearly midnight . . . of how Felix had filled the bath with goldfish at Alfred de Rothschild's, of how she had retaliated by sending a bogus invitation to a hospital for orphans in Paris, asking a hundred children to tea at his apartment on the very day that he was having an *affaire* with . . . well, she wouldn't say whom. The very recital of these artless pranks exhausted Pauline. When Irela eventually ambled to bed, she was too tired to weave any more romances.

Then, two days later, Felix came to say good-bye, as suddenly as he had first arrived. Pauline expected Irela to be inconsolable, but she merely shrugged her shoulders, and made some rather Rabelaisian comments on his probable destination.

'So,' thought Pauline, 'whoever it may be, it is not Felix.'

II

May was well advanced, and still Pauline watched and waited. More than ever was she certain that something was being kept from her. Irela now took far more pains with her appearance than she had done even during the height of the opera season. Her hair was dyed a deeper black, and was always carefully waved. The untidy strands that formerly strayed over her ears now were sternly repressed. Now, too, the manicurist called three times a week instead of only once, and stayed for twice as long. Twice a week, again, Irela went to the osteopath – a fashionable American who cracked the ribs of Europe's *élite* in a superb office overlooking the Rue de Rivoli. Pauline would wait for her in a *salon* decorated in the style of art moderne, with walls on which triangular unicorns vomited pink seashells into slate-grey urns. When she said defiantly, 'There's nothing like it – *nothing*. He says I've got the bones of a girl of twenty!' 'Yes,' thought Pauline disloyally, 'the bones of a girl of twenty after she has played a particularly damaging hockey match.' For after each of her treatments Irela had a stiff neck, and suffered painful twinges in the small of her back, which caused her to see Dingley's neck as a flaming danger signal.

Dresses arrived at the hotel daily. Irela did not often take Pauline to the dressmakers with her. She felt, naturally enough, that if she ordered thirty thousand francs' worth of clothes in a morning she could hardly avoid giving Pauline something for herself. It was much better that Pauline should be left at home, and in the kindness of her heart she said to herself, 'Such a bore for the poor girl, sitting round and seeing me trying on dresses.' Besides, the dressmakers were all so tactless – they *would* admire Pauline and remark in loud asides upon the beauty of her figure. Which would put ideas into her head. Sometimes, when she had been specially tempted, and had bought something particularly lovely – like that model with the chinchilla-trimmed sleeves – she would have a pang of conscience, and would tell them to throw in a simple little linen frock for Pauline – three thousand francs for *that*? Ridiculous! If you're charging me thirty thousand for my model, you can let me have it for two, or I won't take either of them.'

But one day there came an even more signal proof that something was in the wind. Pauline was sitting in the little dining-room waiting for Irela to come to lunch. Suddenly the door swung open and Irela stood before her with outstretched arms.

'Well,' she cried, 'do you like me?'

Pauline, taken by surprise, could not imagine what she meant. She supposed she must be referring to her frock. And so, although she had seen it before, on several occasions, she said, 'I think it's lovely.'

Irela made a gesture of impatience. 'Not the frock. Me!'

Pauline, stared at her. She was standing in the shadow and she could not see very clearly. What on earth was she expected to say? In this light Irela looked exactly the same. And yet, *did* she look exactly the same? Surely, there was something a little odd? At all costs, she felt, she must approve of whatever had been done, but she had first to be certain as to what *had* been done. She therefore assumed a delighted expression, and said, 'My dear!'

Irela beamed. But she was still hungry for more explicit praise. 'Well?'

'Do let me see you in a better light!'

'That's just what I want you to do.' Obediently Irela trotted forward into the sunlight. Then Pauline saw what had happened.

Irela had been made up! For the first time in her life. She who, apart from the stage, had never put anything on her face except soap and water, only occasionally allowing herself a little dab of powder in hot weather, or when the grease-paint was obstinate – she who had made a fetish of her untarnished skin, was made up as elaborately as any *cocotte*. Her face and neck were heavily powdered and creamed. Her lips glistened like *cerises glacées*. There was rouge on her cheek-bones. Most astonishing of all, her eyebrows had been plucked. She looked . . . oh, how did she look? wondered

Pauline. Younger or older? More striking or less striking? It was very difficult to say. On the whole Pauline decided that she looked younger, but a great deal of the character seemed to have gone out of her face.

'Well?' repeated Irela, a little impatiently.

'It's marvellous,' breathed Pauline at last.

'Is it? Ha ha! He he! Is it?' She clapped her hands.

'You look years younger.'

'Do I? Do I? Oh, darling!' She trotted out of the sunlight to the mirror, and stood there, preening herself. 'I wanted it to be a surprise,' she said, as she turned this way and that.

'For me?' Pauline wondered if she would notice the hint.

'Of course, darling.' Irela turned and winked at her. 'And for someone else.'

'Oh, do tell me. Not Felix?'

'Felix? Pshaw! Felix never notices what a woman looks like.'

'Who, then?'

'I'll tell you – very soon!'

With this Pauline had to be content, and they went in to lunch. Irela talked incessantly of the marvels of the beauty parlour. 'They told me I had a skin like a baby's,' she proclaimed, 'but that I mustn't neglect it any longer.' She had been entranced by the masseuse – 'Such an intelligent little woman, *begged* me for a photograph, so I said "Of course."' She had bought astringents, lipsticks, powders for the morning, for the afternoon, for the night. 'We'll have to have a new shelf put up in the bathroom. What *fun*!'

Pauline had come to an end of her exclamations of wonder and approval long before lunch was over. Try as she would, she could not help thinking how much she and Donald might have done with the money which Irela, in a few hours, had spent in trying to set back the clock. 'Set it back!' she cried inwardly. 'If only I might set it forward!' Which is, indeed, as true a summary of the conflict between youth and age as one is likely to hit upon.

Perhaps Irela guessed what she was thinking. For as they rose to take their coffee in the little drawing-room, she stood up proudly, and there was a note of defiance in her voice as she said, 'After all, why shouldn't I keep up with the times? Why shouldn't I make myself attractive? *I'm still a young woman!*'

The sunlight flooded in, lighting pitilessly the withered painted cheeks and the raddled throat, on which the powder lay so thickly.

III

A few days later Irela set Pauline's doubts at rest. She bustled into the room with another telegram. She was so excited that she had a fit of coughing which bent her double. When she was better she gasped, 'He's coming . . . he's coming on 27th May! His ship docks at Marseilles on the 26th and he'll be here the following night. Two weeks, Pauline, only two weeks more!'

The mysterious stranger was therefore someone whom Pauline had not yet met. So Pauline reflected.

And then she remembered that 27th May was also the day on which Donald arrived.

CHAPTER FOUR

I

THESE days of happy expectancy should have been perfect. Irela appeared to be in better health than she had ever been before, and this was a double source of gratification to Pauline, for it meant that there was no danger from this source of any interruption of her own plans with Donald. However, Irela's increasing vitality was not entirely without its drawbacks. She felt, more than ever, the encumbrance of Nurse Phillips. And it was very soon evident that the nurse's days were numbered.

Nurse Phillips, indeed, had become an obsession more grotesque than any of those which had possessed her in the past. The very thought of her seemed to darken Irela's universe. When Nurse Phillips was on her mind, Irela was turned from a brilliant and vivacious woman of the world to a snapping, snarling old vulgarian.

Nothing that the wretched woman could do was right. She still came down to meals, when they were lunching or dining alone, and her pathetic efforts at conversation made Pauline blush with shame. Everything that she said was either completely ignored by Irela, or torn to pieces with a ferocity that made the poor woman blink.

A favourite trick which Irela used to play upon her, after she had delivered herself of some banal but innocuous observation, was to stare at her, to say 'Really!' in tones of undisguised loathing, and then to drum her fingers on the table as though to say, 'God deliver me from this woman!' For instance, one morning at luncheon, Nurse Phillips said:

'It's wonderful how forward the chestnuts are in the Champs Élysées.' She then timidly looked at Irela, as though to say, 'Nobody could take any exception to *that*.'

But Irela did take exception to it. 'Really!' She rolled the 'r' to make it sound more ferocious. Then she drummed her fingers on the table, and shifted in her chair and crossed her legs, all the time munching chicken voraciously. Finally, she exploded. 'We're not in England, Nurse Phillips!'

'Pardon?' said Nurse Phillips. It was one of her most irritating tricks. She said 'Pardon?' from sheer nervousness, not because she had not heard.

'I said,' shouted Irela, not attempting to conceal her hatred, 'that we were not in England.'

Nurse Phillips gave an agonized simper. Very well, oh, very well indeed did she know that she was not in England. She was acutely aware of the fact that she was much too far away from it. But she still failed to see what she had done wrong.

'The chestnuts,' continued Irela, in shrill tones (she was still munching, and swallowing, and shifting about in her chair in a manner that exhausted the onlooker), 'the chestnuts are not forward at all. They are very backward. If you had ever been in Paris before, you wouldn't talk such damned nonsense, Nurse Phillips!'

All of which was, for Pauline, very elevating and delightful. She did not worry about herself, however. Her sympathies were fully engaged with Nurse Phillips. Every day added to the score of that person's troubles.

One of her duties was to massage Irela's back. It might have been thought that Irela, being a very rich woman, and a woman not entirely averse to considering her own comfort, would have procured the assistance of someone less hateful to her, for such operations. But no . . . she stuck to Nurse Phillips like a leech, exacting every servile duty from her and yet complaining, loudly and incessantly, of her inefficiency, her stupidity, and her malice.

One evening shrill screams came from the bedroom during the massage hour. Pauline, who had been standing on the balcony, listlessly watching the cars that sped up and down the Bois, speculating on the remarkably beneficent fate which prevented them all from crashing together in a mass of tangled steel, ran back into the room, fearing that at last the spirit of Nurse Phillips had risen in righteous fury, and had smitten Irela a mortal blow. Irela, at that moment, burst through the door. She was almost naked except for a towel round her shoulders.

'She hit me! She hit me!'

She stood there whimpering, her lank, black dyed hair falling over her shoulders. Her bare arms stood stamping her feet in the centre of the room. Then Irela would place the medicine glass on the table and look at it. Sometimes Nurse Phillips had spilt a little in the effort to make haste, and then Irela would say, 'So you grudge me my medicine, do you? You don't want me to get well? No? Bring me the bottle!' And at other times, if the medicine overlapped, by even the fraction of an inch, the appointed mark, Irela would seize it, stare at it as though it were a draught of hellebore, and cry, 'So you're trying to poison me, are you? Giving me overdoses, eh?' Whereupon she would fling the medicine, glass and all, into the fireplace, and stamp out of the room. And every twinge that she suffered afterwards, every spasm of pain, would be attributed to the fact that Nurse Phillips was trying to poison her, that she dared not take her medicine at all, and that if this sort of thing went on much longer, she would die.

III

The crisis arrived a few days after the massage incident. Pauline had been a walk by herself in the Bois. Very delicate and lovely had been the tender leafage overhead, a green so sweet and innocent that it bore something of the pathos of childhood, so soon to pass. Through the pale passages of liquid green she had wandered, while the shadows played about her, and the lake, ever glimmering in the distance, was a tapestry of silver cloth, on which quaint designs in blue and scarlet were being traced by the parasols of ladies in canoes. Yes . . . there was a delicacy, a fastidiousness in these leafy ways that caused her to walk proudly, to hold her head high, and to imagine brave pageants in which she and Donald were lovers . . . pageants where he rescued her, with a silver lance, from the forces of evil, or where she knelt over him in exquisite compassion, and stayed the crimson blood that stained his white forehead.

From this walk she returned to an episode so sordid that, had she not possessed an exceptional sense of loyalty, and an unusual clarity of vision, which enabled her to see the motive behind all Irela's actions, she would have packed her trunks and fled that night.

When she reached the apartment the first thing she saw was a newspaper, lying on the floor in the crumpled condition which always showed that Irela had been reading it. She picked it up. On the front page, marked with a blue pencil, was a story headed:

'City Honours Greatest Prima Donna.'

'Baba Letoile at the Guildhall.'

And then, underneath, there was the usual sort of story about Baba, who had apparently been entertained by the Lord Mayor, or some such nonsense. None of this news would have been particularly disturbing had it not been for the pencilled note at the bottom of the page. It was in Arthur Kober's handwriting and it read, 'I am sure you will be delighted to hear of the prowess of your protégée. A.K.'

Pauline let the paper fall to the floor. This was bad news. It implied a gloomy dinner, at which all her powers of persuasion and of optimism would be needed. She wondered where Irela was. Lying down, she supposed. Recovering from the shock. She decided to leave her to herself until the worst tantrums had worn off.

She went to her own room. As her hand was on the door she paused. Strange sounds came from inside. What could it be? She opened the door, her heart beating quickly.

Nurse Phillips was lying on her bed, sobbing . . . deep, terrible sobs that seemed to rack her whole body.

'What is it?' cried Pauline, running forward. 'What is the matter?'

Nurse Phillips, still sobbing, lifted her head and looked at Pauline. Although she was sincerely moved by the sight of her unwonted grief Pauline could not help thinking, 'How ridiculous she looks! How pathetically ridiculous!' The eyes were red and swollen, the face puffy and white. Then she blamed herself for thinking such things. She sat down on the bed and put her hand round Nurse Phillips' shoulders.

Gently she said, 'Won't you tell me what is the matter?'

'I have to go . . . back to Canada,' sobbed Nurse Phillips.

Pauline breathed a sigh of relief. If that was all, surely there was no great need for all this lamentation. Nurse Phillips had been longing to go for weeks. Why was she so upset about it? She put her thoughts into words.

'I thought you *wanted* to go?'

Nurse Phillips sat up, gulped, and tried to dry her eyes. But the tears still streamed down her cheeks as she said, 'Yes. But not in a one-class boat.'

Pauline looked at her, puzzled. 'I don't understand.'

Nurse Phillips, with many gulps and shivers, explained. 'Madame Irela says I'm poisoning her. Well . . . that we needn't argue about. She's an hysterical case, and she'll soon be a mental one.' Indignation was gradually restoring her self-control. 'I'm quite prepared to answer, in a court of law, for my efficiency. 'I've nursed Royalty, I've nursed Prime Ministers, I've . . .'

'Yes,' interrupted Pauline quietly. 'I know you're absolutely capable. I've always known that. But what was it you were saying about a one-class boat?'

Nurse Phillips stared at her with a sullen expression. 'She says that she won't pay for me to go back first class.'

'What?' Pauline, with all her loyalty to Irela, could not help looking disagreeably surprised.

'She swears that she won't pay for it. It's monstrous.' Nurse Phillips, by now, was crying no more. Her eyes were hot, dry, angry. 'It's a recognized thing, in the medical profession, that nurses travel first. Nobody's ever questioned it. The poorest families, if they engage a nurse, provide for that.

A nurse is a lady, Miss Joycey. She isn't a housemaid.'

Pauline tried desperately to think of something to say, without success.

'It's the most outrageous thing Madame Irela has done since I've been with her,' continued Nurse Phillips with rising wrath. 'She tells me I can go back on a one-class boat, which means a *third*-class boat. She, with all her money, tells me that she can't afford more than fifteen pounds, which is the fare she proposes to pay. The first-class fare, on the slow boats, is only twenty-eight. But Madame Irela, who spends a thousand pounds on a bracelet she sees in a shop window, and grows tired of it after she's worn it once, can't afford the difference between thirteen pounds and twenty-eight pounds in order to send me back as I *should* be sent!'

Pauline took Nurse Phillips' hand, and patted it nervously. At all costs she must stop this outburst.

She said:

'Please, please, don't be so upset. I'll speak to Madame Irela. I'm sure she doesn't mean what she says. She's overwrought just now. She's had bad news. She doesn't mean . . .'

'Doesn't *mean*?' Nurse Phillips snatched away her hand. Her voice rose almost to a scream. She faced Pauline, trembling violently. 'Will you never understand?' she cried.

'Understand?'

'Do you know what Irela said when I told her that I would not go back, unless I travelled first class?'

'No?'

'She said that if I didn't' – and here Nurse Phillips leant forward, to give extra point to her appalling remark – '"*Jesus Christ walked on the waters and so can you!*"'

And then Pauline laughed . . . hopelessly, hysterically. She flung herself on the bed, sobbing this fearful laughter against the incongruous obscenity of life.

And it was thus that Irela discovered them – appearing like an angry goddess in the doorway – shimmering in a violet creation of Worth, with a spray of diamonds in her hair.

But all her abuse of Pauline, during the next few days, all her accusations of conspiracy, and 'stabbing in the back' fell on deaf ears. For Pauline, by now, was numbed in spirit. And she looked with dull, uninterested eyes on the little Scotswoman who took Nurse Phillips' place, after that much-abused woman had sailed from Cherbourg, in a first class, single cabin on the *Ile de Paris*.

CHAPTER FIVE

I

DONALD and his sister were coming by the train which arrived at the Gare du Nord at midnight. Irela's friend was coming by the train which arrived at seven. And Pauline wished that it were the other way about.

Not that she was any longer assailed by doubts. Her mind was made up. Come what may she would be meeting Donald half an hour after midnight at the Gare de Lyon, and nothing would keep her from boarding the train and speeding south with him.

Yet she felt anxious. Things had gone wrong so often before . . . was it possible that they could go right at last? Then she reflected that the reason they had so often gone wrong was that she herself had been weak . . . had failed him. Well, she was weak no longer. Irela could beg, command, fall down in a fit, be run over by a taxi, be trapped in a burning building . . . it would not affect her plans. Besides, why should she worry when Irela was keyed up with expectancy for her own lover?

All the same, she was anxious. There was thunder in the air, literally as well as metaphorically. As she looked out of the window she could see the clouds were black over the Bois, and shot with faint lightnings.

'I 'ates lightning.'

Pauline started and looked round. It was Tremlowe, who had crept into her bedroom softly.

'You startled me.'

'Sorry, miss.' Tremlowe sniffed. 'I came in here to get out of the way of 'er ladyship. She's in an awful mood.'

Pauline frowned. 'You mustn't say that, Tremlowe.'

Tremlowe sniffed again and ignored the reproof.

'Why do you hate lightning, Tremlowe?'

Tremlowe's eyes lit up. It was the first time for some weeks that anybody had asked her a question about herself. And unless people ask one questions about oneself . . . well, there is a feeling that the world is a hard, unsympathetic place. So she replied with alacrity, 'I 'ates lightning because when I was a little girl my mother took me for a walk in a thunderstorm. And when the storm was at its 'ight, she told me a story about a man who'd been struck and had 'is leg twisted round his neck.'

'Oh . . . but that's horrible!'

''Orrible indeed, miss.' Yet there was a certain relish in the way she said it. 'Right round 'is neck, she said, the leg was twisted. In an instant. And of course they could never twist it back again.' She shook her head grimly. 'That's what I'm always afraid of when it comes on to thunder and lightning . . . 'aving my leg twisted round my neck.' And she added, with complete gravity, 'What 'er ladyship would say if that happened . . . well, one doesn't like to think of it, does one?'

Pauline tried not to smile.

'Isn't her ladyship . . . feeling up to the mark?' She asked the question almost involuntarily. She had not meant to discuss Irela at all. It was neither good policy nor good manners. Still, the question was asked and it started a stream of Tremlowe's confessions.

'Oh, it's my nerves, miss . . . that's what makes it so difficult. . . . I wouldn't mind being sworn at nor told that I'm not 'alf there, nor 'aving it said that I'm a liar . . . though I must say I wouldn't stand that from anybody but a great artist like 'er ladyship. . . .'

'You should have some aspirin,' said Pauline.

'It goes to my 'eart. Besides, aspirin wouldn't cure my trouble. Because my trouble isn't anything to do with me. . . . It's to do with 'er ladyship.'

'How?'

''E's coming to-night, isn't he?'

'That's no concern of ours.' Pauline spoke sharply.

'What's going to 'appen?' She took a step towards Pauline.

'What do you mean?' Pauline felt a tremor of fear . . . so strange did this little red-faced woman look, silhouetted against the window, with the dark clouds behind her, and the trees twitching faintly in the distant lightning's reflection.

'It's ten years since they've met,' whispered Tremlowe again.

'Ten years!' She held up a finger, and opened her mouth wide, as though listening to a footfall in the passage. But there was only the low rumble of the thunder. She kept her eyes on Pauline.

'Ten years,' she repeated, still in the same soft, trembling voice. 'And they're old now. When they were together last it was in Paris too, but then 'er ladyship was only middle-aged. 'Er voice . . . oh it was wonderful then, miss, like an autumn day . . . and it wasn't only 'er voice . . . she could still . . . ' She chuckled, rather horribly. 'But I mustn't talk like this.' She turned sharply and looked towards the door. But there was nobody.

'You certainly must not, Tremlowe.' Pauline's voice, however, lacked conviction. She did not wish to listen to secrets to which she had no right. But suddenly she was seized by a violent curiosity to learn the identity of this mysterious stranger. Tremlowe could tell her. She turned to Tremlowe, and asked her, 'Who is he?'

And Tremlowe said, 'The Duc de Vallorbes.'

II

'Who?'

Tremlowe repeated it.

Pauline searched her brain. But she could not fix the identity. Then Tremlowe said: –

''E's one of the greatest gentlemen of France. A semi-royal. If there 'adn't been the French Revolution 'e'd 'ave been a royalty. But even now, there's something royal about 'im, and something extraordinary too, for 'e doesn't live like ordinary men. 'E's been an exile, they've 'ad laws passed against 'im . . . 'e's wild. 'E disappeared for five years after the war, and in those five years nobody knew where 'e was, except 'er ladyship. 'E's been in Africa now . . . not just big-game 'unting, like most gentlemen, but something funny as well, mixed up with religion. 'Er ladyship's told me little bits now and again, when she's in the mood.'

'Were they . . . ' Pauline paused, wondering how she should phrase the question. 'Were they . . . very fond of one another?'

Tremlowe put her hands on her hips, threw back her head, and emitted a low cackle. 'Fond? Fond? It was the greatest love affair *I* ever 'eard of.' Then she became suddenly serious, and shook her head.

'But it was always difficult, in a way, for 'er ladyship, I mean. You see, 'e was thirty when they met. She was thirty-eight. Which makes 'im forty-two to her fifty when they separated, ten years ago. For twelve years they were together, on and off . . . But why should I be telling you this, when you know it already. . . .'

'I didn't know it. . . .' She waved Tremlowe away. 'I don't want to know it.'

'Why, it was the talk of Europe.' Tremlowe folded her arms. The thunder growled again. 'Not only of England, or France, or Hitaly . . . ' she said contemptuously, 'but of Europe. 'E was related to the King of Italy, and the King protested. 'E followed 'er to Russia when she sang at Moscow, and they sent couriers to fetch him 'ome. She led 'im on . . . of course . . . although she always pretended that it wasn't her fault. Not 'er fault!' She shook with silent laughter.

Pauline roused herself. This was scandalous . . . this listening to the gossip of an old maid. She said, 'Tremlowe, you mustn't say any more. That's enough. You can go.'

But Tremlowe did not move. 'I'll go in a minute, miss. I like you. We all like you. You're a lady, if ever there was one. You never say an unkind word to nobody, and yet you know 'ow to keep your place. Oh, I've noticed things, miss, and I've 'eard things, and I'm grateful to you. And that's why I'm telling you this now.'

She leaned forward and raised a crooked finger. As she did so a sudden torrent of rain assaulted the shimmering pains behind her. Rat . . . tat . . . tat beat the rain, like a ghostly petulant tattoo. And the leaves of the chestnut trees fluttered wildly, their late blossoms flying.

'Stick to your young man, miss, whatever happens! Stick to your young man!'

'Thank you, Tremlowe . . . thank you. And now you must really . . .'

Tremlowe interrupted her. 'Whatever 'er ladyship says or does. Don't you pay no heed to it. 'Er ladyship's not normal, and in a few hours she may be less normal still.'

'Tremlowe!'

'There may be an awful shock in store for 'er ladyship.' Tremlowe licked her lips, and her eyes narrowed. 'An awful shock!' she whispered again. 'She's never faced the fact that she's an old woman, yet. Only last night, when I fastened the diamonds round 'er neck, she looked at me in the glass . . . she always talks to me in the glass . . . never turns 'er 'ead round . . . and she said, "I'm still a young woman, Tremlowe." She . . . 'er ladyship still a young woman! If you could see what I've seen . . .' She laughed, a strange croaking laughter.

It was then that Pauline, in shame and anger, cried, 'Stop . . . stop! Tremlowe, I forbid you to . . .'

But her words were lost in a tremendous crash of thunder that split the roofs of Paris like a mailed fist. The wind and the storm leapt upon them. She rushed to close the windows. When she turned round again Tremlowe had fled.

III

The storm was over quickly. It left a Paris that shone and sparkled beneath a burnished sky, a Paris that smelt of warm, wet leaves and a southern breeze.

Pauline lunched with Irela in the Bois. They had a table in the open air, beneath a big orange-striped parasol. Irela was dressed in a white coat trimmed with fur. Through the greater part of the meal, she was thoughtful and silent. Only when they came to the stage of *fraises du bois*, with their beautiful accompaniment of thick yellow cream, did she lean forward and say, 'I've been thinking over your future, darling.'

'My future?' Pauline blushed. She wondered if Irela was going to refer to Donald.

'Or perhaps I should say our future.'

'We get on so well together . . . give me just a *tiny* drop more Cointreau, no, not so much or I shall be toxybo . . . here, you take a sip, darling. Really! You're taking it *all* . . . give me the bottle. . . . There! Where was I?'

'We got on so well together, you were saying?'

'Oh, yes! And I was thinking that there was really no reason why we shouldn't *always* get on well together.'

She looked at Pauline quickly. But she learnt nothing. For Pauline's lids were lowered.

Always! The word rang through Pauline's head. It had about it a strange dead quality. Why was that? Above her were the singing branches, behind her the laughing water. The air echoed with the bright kaleidoscopic symphony of knives, forks, clanging plates, clatter, distant music . . . and all these happy sounds were shot through with the metallic splinters of bird song. Her limbs felt light and free . . . it was an hour when one should dance. Yet her heart was heavy . . . and the word 'Always' weighed upon it like a pall.

'But of course.' She cursed herself as soon as she had said those words. Was there, in her, some other being, some curious hypnotized self, who forced her to do Irela's bidding? Was there some slave, chained deep in her soul, whose dictates, by some strange psychological paradox, she was being forced to obey?

Irela sipped her Cointreau contentedly.

'And so,' she continued, 'I've been thinking that really you ought to have a little money of your own.'

Pauline stirred uneasily in her seat. She always felt embarrassed when people talked about money.

'No . . . don't thank me, darling, not yet. Just listen to what I have to say. I think the best thing to do – much the best thing to do – would be to take out a life insurance.'

'Yes?'

'I don't mean, of course, just the ordinary insurance which is paid when you die – don't let's think of horrid things like that – but something you get after a period of years. Say fifteen years. . . .'

'Fifteen years!' Pauline could not help the dismay from ringing in her voice.

'Well really, darling, don't talk as if it were a lifetime. Fifteen years is nothing . . . absolutely nothing!'

'No . . . of course not.'

'And you don't want to be independent any sooner than that. Do you?'

Pauline did not reply. Irela took her silence for assent. She continued:

'You see . . . it's really very interesting, if one thinks about it . . . you're only twenty-one now . . . an absolute infant.' She sighed, and then smiled again. 'But still, one isn't young always. And if, every year, I pay £400 – as a matter of fact, it isn't quite as much as that, it's £369, 12s. 4d. – you'll be be entitled when you're thirty-five to about £7000.'

'Seven thousand pounds!' echoed Pauline. But that was not really what she would have said, had she spoken without forethought. She would have said, in a very different tone of voice, 'Thirty-five!' There was a terrible sound about that number. It had a sterile ring. It seemed a sort of No Man's Land of age. Thirty-five! What was the use of seven thousand pounds, or seventy thousand pounds, when one was thirty-five? Then, she suddenly realized the absurd nature of these fleeting impressions. Why – one would never be thirty-five! (And indeed, when one is twenty-one, the idea of ever being thirty-five is too fantastic to be considered.) So she added hastily, 'Why, it's a fortune!'

'It certainly is.' Irela was gratified that Pauline was being so suitably impressed by the figures with which she was feeding her. 'It certainly is,' she repeated. 'Seven thousand pounds at five per cent. is three hundred and fifty pounds a year. But there's no reason why you should be content with five per cent. If you liked to buy an annuity, you could get eight. Which would be over five hundred a year, for life. Of course, they take your capital when you die, but as you haven't any dependants . . .'

Pauline looked up suddenly. What was it that made her start like that? A tone in Irela's voice? A queer suspicion . . . but of what?

It was as though somebody had whispered in her ear, 'Take care!' And as she looked into Irela's eyes, which were slightly narrowed in the sunlight, she seemed to see in them an expression of cunning. Cunning! The word had only to enter her head to be dismissed. She was being morbid, ungenerous. And as she stared Irela blinked, and the illusion vanished.

'It's terribly generous of you,' she murmured.

There for the moment Irela let the matter rest. She was very well satisfied with Pauline's attitude. And she was particularly pleased that she had managed to sow these suggestive hints just before Pauline went away on this holiday with her young man. One never knew quite what young people might do, on the Riviera. But Pauline was a sensible girl, and now that she knew how happily everything was being arranged for her, she would be very unlikely to get too deeply involved with any scatter-brained young American.

'Well – that's that!' She leant back in her chair, and smacked her lips. Really, life was still very much worth the living. Her digestion was functioning perfectly. The lobster had, as yet, shown no signs of proclaiming its independence, and she did not see why it should. The *fraises du bois* had been delicious, and the Cointreau was exactly the right thing to finish it all off . . . she gazed vaguely at the label on the bottle, which recounted the interesting fact that Cointreau was made from orange leaves and rested with miraculous lightness on even the most delicate stomachs. Well, she had not a delicate stomach, thank God! Though, of course, she told herself, she had a *different* stomach . . . un estomac distingué . . . that went without saying . . . but not a damned, silly, delicate stomach.

And apart from the lunch, Maurice was due to arrive to-night! She hoisted her chin quickly at the thought, and for the hundredth time she wondered if she had been a fool not to have her face lifted. Then, she was quickly comforted by the reflection that *he* would be older too, and, she hoped, that he would not have worn so well as she had. Yet, did she hope this? When she remembered how he had looked that night at Roquebrune, silhouetted against the dying, violet-wreathed sun. . . .

She passed her tongue quickly over her upper lip. Yes, it was still great fun. Everything was great fun. And Pauline . . . how sweet she was! Pauline, going off on her little jaunt! But why not? For the hundredth time she assured herself there was no real danger. She was cold physically – Irela was sure of that – Pauline was not like herself, in whose old veins the mad elixir still pulsed fitfully. But that was not what she had really meant when the word 'danger' had entered her head. She had meant that there was no real danger of Pauline deserting her. She had played her cards too well for that.

IV

It was six o'clock, and again the clouds were piling over Paris. Pauline, standing at her window, waiting, waiting, wondered if this day would never end, wondered, too, what strange freak the weather would play before it was over.

For the last two hours it had grown almost wintry again. Nor was this her imagination only. The temperature had fallen perceptibly, and it was already dark enough to light up.

She stood there in the twilight. The apartment was very still. A few minutes before Irela had bustled through, telling her that she was going to put on her hat and coat and that she would be shortly coming in to say good-bye.

Good-bye. It seemed incredible that she would soon be free, even for the few golden days that Irela had allowed her. They were going to be marvellous days, she knew that, days that would decide the whole tenor of her life. And they were on the point of beginning.

Then she heard the discreet buzz of the bell on the little front door. She started violently. Who could be calling at this hour? Then she remembered that it was probably Dingley, calling her to say that the car was ready to take Irela to the station. But no . . . Dingley never came up. He always telephoned from the hall. Who could it be? Then she frowned, and told herself not to be so absurdly suspicious. It might be any one of a thousand people . . . a messenger calling with a note, a page boy, a waiter. . . . Anyway, Tremlowe was here, and she would attend to it.

Yet, her ears were strained to catch the sound which echoed through. And they were strange sounds . . . a man's voice arguing, in broken English. She could not hear what he said. Nor could she hear Tremlowe's reply, though she fancied that her voice sounded alarmed and agitated. She laced her fingers tightly together. It was ridiculous . . . this apprehension. Then she heard the door slam. Soft footsteps hurried across the hall. There was the sound of a tap on Irela's door. More voices. Another door closed. Silence.

It was at this moment that Pauline on a wild impulse decided to fly. What was she waiting for? Nothing! Irela, it is true, had told her that she would be back in a few moments to say 'good-bye,' but why should she wait for that? It was not as though they had anything to say to one another. Pauline's suitcase was packed. Her coat lay across it, by her side. Her ticket was in her bag. There was absolutely no reason why she should wait. She was going to dine alone at a café. Irela had arranged that, for she had told her that she and Maurice might be coming back here after they had dined themselves, and that she wanted the apartment to herself. Why then should she not go, at once, before anything happened?

'Yes,' she said to herself, 'I will creep out now . . . while there is time. . . .' She turned round. As she did so, she stifled a scream. In the doorway stood Tremlowe. But a different Tremlowe. She swayed there, wisps of grey, lustreless hair hanging over her forehead, and her face was lit by a hideous grin. She kept jerking her thumb over her shoulder, and as Pauline stepped forward a sweet, sickly scent of gin assailed her.

'Tremlowe . . . what do you want?'

''Er ladyship!' she hiccoughed. 'She wants you.' She tottered, steadied herself, regarded Pauline with an owlish smile.

Pauline stayed quite still. Her eyes took in the whole fantastic scene . . . the shadowed room, her suitcase by the wall with its gleaming handles, the rich rose-pink of the couch by the bed, and the smudgy figure of Tremlowe swaying in the doorway. She had only to take up the suitcase, to pass that horrible figure, and she was free. But she could not. She could only stand, while her lips said, 'Why?'

'Wants you.' Again the owlish smile. 'Very important.'

With a final effort to control herself, Pauline closed her eyes. In a few seconds she had reasoned herself into a condition that she believed was normal. She said, 'It is nothing. It can be nothing. I will go to her. It is the least I can do.'

Not looking at Tremlowe, she passed through the door. Behind her echoed Tremlowe's voice. 'Don't forget, miss . . . don't forget what I . . . what I . . .'

An ugly sound half-way between a cough and a giggle was all she heard.

CHAPTER SIX

I

'Come here . . . come here.'

Pauline, for a moment, seemed unable to move. The figure that crouched, hump-backed, in the chair, looked doomed and horrible. Had it not been for the voice she would not have realized that it was Irela. Yet even the voice was thin and croaking – a tortured parody of Irela's voice – like a very old little boy, crying in the dark.

Then she stepped forward quickly. A white wrinkled hand came up and clutched hers.

'What is it . . . what is it?'

'He's here! In Paris!' The shoulders hunched themselves together, shook.

'Here . . . already?'

Pauline smoothed her hand mechanically. What did this mean?

'They haven't told me. The keeper's just been.'

'The keeper?'

'He's mad!'

'Mad?'

'Mad!'

In a grotesque chorus the word repeated itself. The shadowed, twilit room seemed to echo with it. Mad . . . mad . . . mad! An insane desire to laugh seized Pauline. She wanted to throw her hands above her head, so that her arms would cast wild black shadows against the ceiling, and cry, 'Mad, mad!' till the poison in her was spent, till she herself was sane with exhaustion.

She stood there, helpless. There seemed nothing that she could do. And now, as if to heighten the melodrama of this fantastic scene, the clouds began to pile themselves deeper and darker outside the window, and the thunder muttered once more in the distance. Through it came the dry voice of Irela, speaking as though she were suffocating from an intolerable grief:

'He came here soon after six. . . . I had put on my hat and the car was waiting . . . he is called Domenic . . . he has been with Maurice since he arrived. They suspected it for a long time . . . for months . . . he was lonely out there, in the heat, with no one, he was always highly strung . . . oh, if I had known, if I had known!'

In the dusk her hand beat a feeble, fluttering tattoo on her knee, the diamonds winked and sparkled, even in this light.

Pauline lifted her head. She was making a tremendous fight for self-control. She clutched at every mental straw that floated through her bewildered consciousness. In this quiet room, whose only sound was the slow beating of Irela's hand in a strange rhythm, she closed her eyes, and said to herself, 'I'm all right. I'm sane, I'm free. I am sorry for Irela, but she must fight her own battles. In five hours

I shall be with Donald.' Five hours. What might not happen in five hours?

Then the telephone rang.

II

The telephone continued to ring.

Neither of them seemed able to go to it. Irela's hand ceased to move. Pauline stared into the dark corner whence the sound came. Tinkle, tinkle, tinkle . . . and then the slow mutter of the thunder . . . tinkle, tinkle, tinkle . . . what was it that paralysed them? Why did they both feel that some terror lurked at the other end of the wire?

'Go to it.'

Pauline stepped forward. The bell rang again. She glanced back at Irela. Then she went to the telephone and lifted the receiver.

There was a high, blurred hum, like the noise that echoes in one's head when one is taking an anæsthetic. Through the hum drifted a voice that said many times 'Château Delacroix.'

She repeated it to Irela.

Irela rose to her feet. Her green dress sparkled in the shadows. 'Yes, yes . . . that is where they have taken him.'

Pauline listened again. 'De la part du Duc de Vallorbes . . . c'est le Docteur Stalyx qui parle. . . .'

'The doctor . . . he wants to speak to you.'

Irela came forward. Her face was very white. Pauline remembered inconsequently, as she handed her the instrument, that she had never seen Irela's face white before.

'Yes, yes, it is Madame Irela. Yes. . . .'

Pauline, clutching her hands, stared out of the window.

Irela was speaking again. 'Yes. I understand.' Her voice was husky. 'It mayn't last. Perhaps only an hour. I will come.'

She put down the receiver. Pauline clutched her hands more tightly. Her eyes seemed fixed for ever on the branches that swayed so delicately outside. 'Green branches . . . lucky branches . . . so close to one another,' she murmured. 'Able to lie, so long, limb to limb, with the pale leaves singing around you, so that you may sigh your secrets fearlessly, through the long night.' And as she sat there, the green branches became dark and grey in the mist of her tears, and from an immense distance she heard Irela saying, 'Yes?'

'He's sane . . . just for a little while . . . a lucid interval. . . .'

Pauline bit her lip. She was shaken by a fierce, intolerable laughter. It was a grim laughter that tore her spirit, a cruel laughter that was like the flash of lightning that streaked its thin white against the curdled sky outside. She closed her eyes . . . 'lucid interval,' she whispered to herself, 'a lunatic . . . wants Irela . . . he's having a lucid interval . . . wants Irela . . . wants me . . . I expect he's got straws in his hair . . . it's all too funny.'

But it was not funny. Nor was it false. It was happening, here and now, in this room. She was a real person. Irela was a real person. And here they were, facing one another, in a room in Paris, with a thunderstorm threatening outside, and a lunatic's keeper on the other end of the telephone. These were facts. They had to be faced. She took a deep breath. Her voice was calm and grave as she answered, 'You want to go to him now?'

'I must.' Irela wrung her hands. 'It may be my only chance.'

'And would you like me to go with you?'

'Oh my dear . . . if you please.' There was no command in Irela's voice. There was only a humble, desperate supplication.

'Very well,' said Pauline. 'The car is still at the door. We had better go at once.'

She glanced at the clock. It was a quarter-past seven.

III

The Château Delacroix lies about ten miles outside Paris, to the north-east of Versailles. It has no connection with the various branches of the Delacroix family whose names are graven on the scroll of France's history. It was, for many generations, the seat of a family even more illustrious, but fifty years ago it fell into decay, until it was taken by a German Jew who had made a fortune out of the aftermath of the Franco-Prussian war. Some fatality seemed to hang over it, however, for the German Jew committed suicide a few years after he took possession.

Since then, the Château Delacroix passed through many hands. It was finally bought, in 1920, by a medical syndicate whose board of directors included a Viennese psycho-analyst, a rich young English cotton merchant, the widower of a Parisian *cocotte* and a Presbyterian American business man, who did all the work, and pocketed most of the profits.

Through the green valleys under the blue-black sky, Irela's car sped, chic, swift, gleaming. They sat in it, the two women, silent. Within half an hour they drew up at the tall iron gates.

A porter came to the door, peered through a grille, and shuffled across the gravel to admit them. As the gates swung open, a bell clanged, echoing dolorously through the courtyard. They swept through, ran down a curving drive, and stopped in front of a gaunt porch that seemed like the entrance to a cave.

Pauline had just time, before they entered, to look around her. The building was grey and rambling, and though it was in a good state of preservation there was a dead look about it. The stone was lifeless, and the iron bars which guarded many of the windows robbed the glass of its lustre . . . the windows were only blind eyes. Vast cedar trees stretched their branches towards the roof, sometimes touching the slates.

As the footman opened the door, a shrill scream echoed from a distant part of the building. Irela drew back, and clutched Pauline's arm. For a moment she stayed still. The scream came again, and then a laugh . . . like a parrot's laugh. There was silence. Irela dropped her hands to her side. They entered.

Before she went upstairs, she turned to Pauline. Her face was drawn, old, and pitifully white beneath the clumsy patches of rouge. She said:

'I do not know how long I shall be.' She looked away from Pauline. Then, with a ghastly attempt at brightness, 'I wouldn't stay in here if I were you. It may be catching.' The laugh she tried to force turned into a sob. She muttered something about going for a walk in the garden. Then she walked up the stairs, and Pauline was left alone in the waiting-room.

IV

It was very quiet in the waiting-room. Too quiet . . . oh, much too quiet. Pauline longed for some noise, but what noise could come to her here save the high and windy laughter of the damned? She looked up to the pictures on the walls and something of the insanity which lurked in the corridors outside, which permeated the whole of this house like a vile perfume, seemed to cast its shadow on the frail faces that stared at her from the gloom. There was a gleam in the eye of this powdered duchesse of the *dix-huitième siècle* that was not the result of any artist's cunning . . . it was as though the very portraits were tainted . . . the limbs of this cavalier were surely twisted in a curious and forbidding shape . . . and even the water-colour of this child standing in a doorway . . . a delicate Italian piece of the school of Guardi . . . was vacuous and blank with the hideous sterility of the idiot world.

She took a deep breath, and turned round. For a moment she felt better. Then as she observed the furniture, depression weighed on her again, like a stifling blanket. The chairs and tables, the china, the bibelots, all seemed to range themselves into a crazy pattern. There is a story by G. K. Chesterton in which he speaks of a knife that is 'the wrong shape,' a knife that is intrinsically evil in the very curve of its steel, proclaiming its dreadful purpose by the design on its handle . . . a knife that flashes only in the dark and is clutched only by the fingers of cowards. So did the contents of this room appear to Pauline . . . they were the wrong shape . . . the most gracious curves were perverted . . . the loveliest lustres were only the iridescence of decay.

'I must not think these things,' she told herself. 'I must be sensible . . . sensible . . .' She walked to the window and looked out. Nervously she beat on the cold glass with the points of her nails. Listening abstractedly to the tinkling sound she forgot that it was she herself who caused it, and stared back with the sudden frightened fancy that somebody was tapping on the glass from outside, beating with crazed, purposeless fingers. The silence and the sight of the blank grey pane brought her back to reality. She clenched her hands tightly and tried to smile. It was absurd to work oneself up like this.

The windows opened down to the ground, and she decided to go out. The fresh air would do her good. There could surely be no danger? The château was evidently a perfectly conducted asylum. They would never allow people to wander about who were likely to be dangerous. As she stepped through the window, and looked around the deserted terraces, it seemed that nobody else was about at all. She had the grounds to herself.

An air of deep and hopeless melancholy hung over the trees and the lawns. So fatal did they appear, so dedicated to mourning and to death, that a little hysterical laugh sprang spontaneously to her lips, to be stifled instantly. But the laugh seemed to echo and echo in an insane tinkle – she could hear it behind the lichen-covered statues that brooded by the lake, in the cypresses that stood like hooded figures round the walls, in the mist that curled and drifted round the irregular roofs. She stepped quickly forward in alarm. She was in the middle of the lawn now, and the laugh was beginning to grow fainter. Soon it would be gone altogether. She walked on quickly, snatching at a rose that hung its blighted head from a marble urn. She wiped the dirt from its outer petals with fingers that trembled a little. There, the laugh had stopped altogether now. She felt much better. She sighed, and even smiled. Turning her head, she began to study the house, calmly.

Really, she had been right to laugh. The château was altogether too perfect to be true. It reminded her of one of those grim, scarred etchings which one finds in early frontispieces to *Bleak House* – gaunt trees, and a wild moon, and a flight of ghostly crows against a tattered sky. Even the hour was appropriate. Twilight on a stormy evening in early spring. Shadows creeping, creeping over the grass. The sense of tension which for some spirits is always present in this season, the feeling of life in suspension, of a land that soon will be rippling with the colours of summer. How far away summer seemed now!

She was becoming morbid again. She riveted her eyes on the building to prevent her attention from wandering. In its leisured lines and its sloping walls there was all the dignity of the pompous age in which it had been built. So 'dignified' indeed – (she dared not admit that the word she wished to use was 'forbidding') – that even the creepers seemed to have faltered before those stern façades, the ivy trailed apologetically, almost abjectly round the foundations, never circling upwards in a warm embrace, the virginia shrivelled and died before it reached the upper windows.

She watched those upper windows. In some the blinds were already drawn and now and then she would see figures pass in silhouette. Who were they, those figures? Mad or sane? Ah – what did it matter? Behind the blinds, all were alike. Draw down a little strip of canvas and all differences were blotted out. Draw over a shroud of linen, and all distinctions were banished, in death. She bit her lip. There she was again . . . she *must* stop her mind from wandering.

At this precise moment she was opposite the extreme left wing, looking up at the suite where, though she knew it not, the Duc de Vallorbes was housed. Looking up, this delicate, ivory creature, with eyes bright from fear, and lips parted so that the cold air which she had breathed danced before her like white ghostly feathers. Looking up, waiting. And it was then that through the open window there came a low, rippling chain of melody.

She stood transfixed. Somebody was playing the opening bars of Massanet's 'Barcarolle.' Yes, that was it. How often had she heard that smooth and melancholy accompaniment, like a stream in winter flood! It was one of Irela's loveliest songs. Was she . . . would she . . .?

The question answered itself. From that high, grey window floated a voice, her voice, in infantile sweetness, of a purity so radiant that it tore the soul. And as the song drifted into the garden, there came, of a sudden, peace, with soft-folding wings. Peace, and a heavenly sanity. Through a gap in the clouds, as though the music had called forth the light the sun shone dimly, lighting the roofs with a golden sheen, turning the lake from a dead cold thing into living sparkling water. Tears came to Pauline's eyes, and she hung her head in an access of exquisite sadness. She was conscious that everything was right again, that the trees were her friends once more, that the statues were just statues, lovely pieces of carven stone, not evil spirits – no, not any more.

'*Dans ton cœur dort un clair de lune . . .*'

That was what she was singing to him. 'In your heart a moonlight sleeps . . .' It was very wonderful of her to have thought of that song. It made his madness seem almost beautiful – like a sleep, a moonlit sleep. Perhaps that was what it really was – perhaps it was just a wandering through a cool world of shadowed crystal, a silver passionless world of silence and shadows. Perhaps he had his 'secret valleys where he might weep undisturbed,' perhaps even the morning skies were dimmed and dusted with stars, so that his tired eyes might know no hurt. 'In your heart a moonlight sleeps.'

And then, it was as though the garden were rent by a flash of lightning. High and sharp an insane cackle split the air. The song stopped . . . the cackle continued . . . the horrible parrot laughter that they had heard when they entered. It seemed to fill the garden with its loathsome reverberations . . . it went on and on . . . louder and louder . . . it was as though it were coming closer to her . . . now it was in her very ears.

She turned and ran back to the house.

As she entered the hall, breathless, she saw Irela coming quickly down the stairs. Her hands clutched the banisters, her head was turned over her shoulder, looking behind her, as though some fearful vision were pursuing. She did not speak to Pauline. She passed her, and got straight into the waiting car. Pauline followed. In silence they drove back to Paris.

CHAPTER SEVEN

I

AND now it was dark. They had spoken no word.

As Pauline entered the little dining-room in the hotel, after walking feverishly up and down her own room, she saw a dim figure standing by the mantlepiece. It was Irela, who turned round sharply. Pauline was stricken by the appalling grief which proclaimed itself from her features.

Irela said, 'I want to say nothing, Pauline. Nothing. Do you understand? He is dead to me, from now and for ever . . . dead. . . .'

Her whole body shivered, her hands stretched out before her as though seeking to clutch something. And then, she dropped her arms to her side, and added in a toneless voice, 'We had better dine.'

'Yes.'

'I will be with you in a minute.'

She left the room. Pauline sat down at the table, and covered her eyes with her hands. A waiter appeared, deftly arranged a cloth, wheeled in a tray, with some hot dishes, which he covered with a napkin.

After a few moments, Irela came back. She handed Pauline her wrist watch. 'You left this in the bathroom,' she said drily. She sat down. In a harsh voice, she said to the waiter, 'Serve us, if you please.'

He served them. He served them with Bortsch, with Sole Colbert, with Noisette d'Agneau, with Bombes pralinés. Irela ate heartily, though sometimes she put down her fork, even when her mouth was full, and stared in front of her, as though she saw some strange vision. And thus she remained, immobile, until the spell was broken, when her jaw suddenly worked again, the fork was lifted to the mouth, a gulp of champagne was swallowed.

In this manner they progressed to the stage of coffee.

'Benedictine? Brandy? Cointreau?'

'Cointreau, please.'

Pauline sipped the Cointreau. It was smooth and fragrant. It had the tang of the south. She realized that she must quickly detach herself from this insane episode. She rose to her feet.

'Now I must go.' Her voice sounded harsh, cruel. Yet, in desperation, she said it again, as though to reassure herself. 'Now I must go.'

'Not yet . . . not yet . . . please, Pauline, you've still another hour.'

'Another hour? But it's a quarter to twelve! My train goes at half-past.'

Irela stifled a sob. 'Look at the clock,' she said.

Pauline looked. A quarter-past eleven. She stared and stared. Surely . . . it must be wrong? Time could not go so slowly? She turned to Irela.

'I'm sorry,' she said. 'I can't think why I thought it was so late.'

'You want to leave me . . . that's all it is . . . you want to leave me.'

'Oh, my dear, it isn't that I want to leave you, it's just that I can't disappoint him.'

'Do you love him so much?' Irela was not looking at her. She was looking at her fingers, which she twined nervously in her lap.

'Yes.'

There was silence. Then, in a dry, strained voice, Irela said, 'We've still an hour. We could play a game of dominoes.'

The wild incongruity of the idea passed Pauline by. Whatever Irela had suggested, in this last mad hour, she would have done. She moved to the drawer where the dominoes were kept. As she did so, she stretched out her hand for the light.

'Don't turn on the light,' cried Irela harshly. 'We'll play by moonlight.'

Pauline nodded dumbly. She moved the table to the window.

'And we'll play for . . .' Irela paused, as she shuffled the pieces.

'Five francs,' said Pauline mechanically.

'No. We'll play for . . . love!' Irela lifted her head. And the moonlight shone full into her eyes, so that they seemed to be luminous in the dark.

II

The moonlight shone, too, upon the dominoes. Their backs of mother-of-pearl glistened with an unearthly sheen. On the green velvet cloth they looked like pale fishes swimming in a pool that was deep and dark. Over them the hands of the two women glided – Pauline's hands with a fluttering uncertain motion – Irela's hands like dry, white claws, with the brilliants winking suddenly upon the fingers.

They played in silence. It was difficult for Pauline to see the numbers. But Irela seemed to be gifted with second-sight. She scarcely glanced at the pallid emblems which she seized so avidly. Her eyes were always upon Pauline. And Pauline was always staring at the table.

Irela won the first game. Almost before the queer white pattern had time to stretch over the cloth. Pauline was left with the double-six and four other pieces.

Pauline thought she had won the second game. She finished first. Irela had one piece left. But when she turned it over, it was a double-blank. It stared at her in the moonlight like a blind white eye. That game was a draw.

The third game was longer. The pieces spread themselves into a complicated pattern. As they played, the only sound in the world seemed to be the faint clicking of the tiny glimmering squares. Irela won again.

And now, a strange and petulant feeling of irritation possessed Pauline. Why should Irela always win? Why should she always take everything? The game of dominoes suddenly assumed a grotesque importance in her eyes. Irela had said that they were playing for love. It was as though some strange symbolism echoed in those words. For love! Very well . . . they would play for love. And this time she would win!

She strained her eyes through the gloom. Irela was already shuffling the pieces.

'This must be the last game.'

'Yes . . . yes . . . the last game.'

She seized her seven pieces and stood them up on the dark cloth. The moonlight shone upon them, showing her a sinister array of black pips. There was the double-six . . . 'mossy-face' of evil memory . . . staring at her, and the double-five, and the double-four. They were all dangerous, unless she could dispose of them properly. She glanced at Irela's hand. Seven white, gleaming pieces . . . so pretty, so innocent . . . why, their smooth surfaces, in this light of infinity, glowed with delicious colours of pink and ethereal mauve. Yet she distrusted them . . . they seemed to wink at her through the gloom.

She put down the double-six on the table. Instantly Irela joined it with a six-three, and scored fifteen. 'Fifteen,' muttered Pauline, and noted the score on the piece of paper by her side. Pauline joined the three-five, Irela put the six-five at the other end and scored another ten. Pauline added the double-five and scored fifteen. But most of this was wiped out immediately by Irela adding the five-blank and scoring yet another ten. It was as though the pieces were enchanted, as though some spell were at work which changed the little pips as soon as Irela touched them, causing them to weave themselves into mystical combinations of numbers. Almost before she realized it the game was over, with a heavy score in Irela's favour.

'You've won.'

'Yes. I've won.'

Pauline stared at the table. And she slowly became conscious that the pattern which the dominoes had taken was formed in a perfect cross. It gleamed and sparkled there – pock-marked with its black dots – stretching its thin white arms to the caressing moon. She continued to stare, and it was as though the table floated away, as though Irela vanished, and there was nothing but this strange cross floating before her in the darkness, and on it, with arms outstretched. . . .

She sat up with a jerk. Her hands shot out and destroyed the pattern. There was a high, delicate clatter. The cross was split into many tumbling pieces. She rose to her feet. She said, 'And now . . . I must go.'

'It's too late.'

'Too late?' My train doesn't go for another hour?'

'It's already gone!'

'What do you mean?'

'It's midnight.'

'But . . . but . . . ' Pauline stared wildly through the gloom to the clock on the mantelpiece, at the little watch on her wrist. 'I don't understand . . . it's . . . you can't mean . . . '

'It's midnight. I altered the clocks.'

Pauline, in after-life, remembered this moment as a moment drained of all colour – as a black and white episode of Time. It had the stark horror of certain etchings by Goya, where the shadows conspire together, and dart away, leaving a space of untouched paper that seems diffused by an unearthly gleam. Irela sat up, straight, stiff, motionless, and the cold light of the moon gleamed on her ruined face. She was like a weird effigy in stone or wood. She might have been carved, petrified, were it not for the black sparkle in her eyes. Even the shadow which she cast against the wall was as a shadow painted eternally – it stayed there, humped, grey, and crooked, as though it were listening, with an insane delight, to the dialogue which drifted, like a moaning breeze, through the room.

'You've done this to me?'

'I did it for your good.'

'How dare you? How dare you?' Pauline's voice rose shrill and distraught. She rushed to the wall and turned on the light.

III

'I shall go . . . I shall go . . . and I shall never come back!'

Oh . . . would that fearful effigy that was pretending to be Irela . . . would it never move again? Would that mouth never move, in anger or in supplication? Would those shoulders be always set, those eyes always stare coldly, malevolently?

'You've tried to possess me . . . to take every bit of me . . . for your own use . . . because you're old, and done for . . . done for! And you want *me* . . . you want me because I'm young . . . and you do this horrible thing to me. . . .' She swept her hand across her eyes. Her fingers were wet and trembling as she drew them away. 'And I loved you. I loved you, really.' She looked at the effigy. Oh, why would it not speak, not speak?

She shut her eyes. But as she shut them, she seemed to look into an infinite night, shot with distant lightnings. So she opened them again. She looked to the opposite wall, past Irela, and her voice was calmer, though it had a deeper melancholy.

'I'm sorry. I feel this is a tragedy for both of us. It's a much greater tragedy for you than for me. Because I shall get over it. I didn't mean to say those terrible things. But I think you will agree that I had a reason. . . .'

The clock, with its lying face, taunted her. But she went on:

'I don't want to go without saying "thank you." I owe you . . . so much. I'll try to repay it one day. One thing I can never repay. And that is the memory of your voice . . . as long as I live . . . there'll be echoes . . . such lovely echoes . . . in my heart. . . .'

The effigy seemed suddenly to crumple. The whole frame of Irela collapsed. Pauline, turning back in the doorway, saw a black, heaving figure, shapeless in the lamplight. And the room was rent with racking sobs.

IV

Well, at least she had the address. Maison Imbert, Roquebrune. And if the train had gone, and if he had gone with it, despairing of her. . . .

The train had gone. She walked up and down the deserted platform, seeking him. Distant engines clanked, and now and then a shrill whistle tore the night air. The platforms were laced by the black shadows of many swinging lamps. Porters looked at her curiously, wondered whether they should carry her bag, paused, and passed on.

She inquired the next train to the South. There was not a good one till the following afternoon.

She spent the night at a little hotel near the station. She did not sleep. She did not even turn off the light. She stared and stared at the wall-paper, which was decorated with faded green leaves, twirled among sprays of forget-me-nots.

CHAPTER EIGHT

I

THE train swept into Monte Carlo station. Pauline got out. She had to carry her bag herself for she was not sure if the few francs that remained to her would even pay for the auto-bus. The bag was not heavy, but after she had passed through the gates into the street, she paused and rested. She felt unspeakably tired.

A grey pall hung over the town. Even when the sun is shining, Monte Carlo is a depressing place. But now, beneath the blanket of cloud, it looked like an empty theatre, with its stalls shrouded in dust sheets. There seemed to be no air at all. Her young lungs felt stifled. And the people who were passing were strangely unreal, like mummies walking. They were so silent too. They hobbled up the escalier leading towards the Casino, and their sticks and crutches made no sound on the marble steps. Against banks of pink ivy-geraniums, gaunt, fantastic spinsters drifted in silhouette. Old men loomed towards her, glared with fish eyes, and were gone.

Oh, this was a nightmare . . . a nightmare indeed! The madness which had surrounded her in the past few days must surely have sown its seeds in her own brain! With hands that shook violently she opened her bag and took out a powder puff. Her mirror showed her a very white face, with black rings under her eyes. Her hair looked untidy. Her hat was crooked. She powdered her nose, and made up her lips. Then she took a handkerchief and petulantly rubbed the lipstick off again. Her face was so white that the make-up gave her a ghastly appearance. She had no rouge. . . . She had never needed it before. Perhaps she might buy some?

'Mademoiselle désire un taxi?'

She shook her head.

'Ce n'est pas pour le Grand Hotel, mademoiselle?'

Again she shook her head.

'Est-ce que mademoiselle permets que je porte sa valise?'

She stamped her foot hysterically. They went away. Who were they . . . these creatures who persecuted her? Donald! Donald! She cried the name aloud. The sound of her own voice was like a douche of cold water to her nervous system. She realized that she was on the point of breaking down completely. And with that divine common sense which all women show in emergencies – a common sense which she possessed to a remarkable degree – she made a supreme effort to gain control of herself.

She took a deep breath, seized her bag, and walked towards a sign in the distance that sent the message *Café*, in letters of gold, to a thirsty world. How she reached it, she did not know. But after she had sat down for a little while, and had absorbed a large cup of *café au lait*, and nibbled a flimsy *brioche*, and smoked a cigarette, she felt saner. Or, to be more accurate, she felt less mad. For the grim pall still hung over this city of the dead. And the masses of pink flowers that sprang so artificially around her were funeral flowers. Yes, even the roses that spumed over the marble balustrades, the cinerarias that stiffened themselves in the curiously shaped beds, and the eternal ivy-geraniums that crawled and crept through every crevice . . . they were all disposed as for the final rites . . . they glowed with the hateful, mocking beauty of those flowers whose doom it is to cast their coloured shadows on the graves of ghosts.

She shuddered. She passed her hand over her eyes. A gaunt white waiter hovered over her. She gave him ten francs, took up her bag.

She climbed the hill. A bus was waiting. Did one go to Roquebrune? Yes, said the conductor, one went. The conductor was a consumptive. His face was like a death-mask.

She got in, and the bus lumbered up the street.

II

A big blue Perrier advertisement covers the side of a little villa that stands at the Quatre Chemins where Pauline alighted. It was this that caught her eye first. Then, when the bus rolled on, waving and twisting round the mountain alleys, she stared into an ever-increasing blueness. A blue of sea and sky, divinely radiated with rays of gold. For, in the brief interval of her journey from Monte Carlo to Roquebrune, the sun was coming out, little by little. And the world . . . her world . . . the real world of touch and sound and scent, was coming back.

If only she were not so tired! Yet, even some of the tiredness seemed to leave her as she carried her bag down the winding road that leads towards the sea. For now a breeze was ruffling her hair, and pale shadows danced about her feet. They were friendly shadows, spun by the tangled lemon branches, that beckoned her on, like wise, fluttering fingers. Many were the shadows and generous was the sunlight . . . gold and grey leapt about her . . . but always these proclaimed themselves beneath an immense arch of blue, against an infinite background of blue. And like the echoes of a symphony so this colour repeated itself in many riotous details around her, in the pinpoint forget-me-nots that sparkled from the hedgerows, in the hairy, drooping anchusas that gleamed against ancient walls, in the exquisite froth of speedwell that formed a humble yet lavish border to the pathway down which her footsteps echoed.

Echoed? Yes . . . the echo pursued her down these painted hills. And with it came many other echoes . . . the thin echo of the violins in Mimi's *addio*, the turbulent call of the woodwind in Desdemona's grief . . . and the voice of a little boy, piping plaintively through it all. There was a singing in her ears . . . she began to run . . . oh, this music, this music, would it never stop . . . she ran faster. She turned a corner, and below her, over the cliff, she saw a beach, and white, dancing breakers.

'Pauline!'

He was there, coming towards her down the path. And as she fell into his arms, all the echoes seemed to be drowned in the strong, simple song of the distant sea.

EPILOGUE

Extract from the *Evening Clarion*, 30th June 1931.

IRELA TO SING AGAIN
FAMOUS SOPRANO'S SURPRISE

NEW RÔLES, NEW CASTE

AND

NEW THEATRE

'I feel it is my duty.'

With these words, delivered in the bell-like tones which have made her the idol of millions, Madame Irela, the world-famous soprano, explained her reasons for launching the new opera season which she proposes to present to London next spring.

'The art of beautiful singing is being forgotten,' she continued, as she paced up and down her exquisite music-room in Charles Street. 'I cannot allow that to happen, while I am alive.'

'Sing myself?' Her eyes shone with such youthful ardour that it was difficult to believe that Irela was a star long before the dawn of the present century. 'Sing myself?' she repeated. And then, spontaneously she

darted to the piano, struck a chord, and sang as though in challenge to the audacious questioner, the opening phrases of the 'Cufietta Rosa' from the second act of La Bohème. *All the old Irela brilliance . . .*

Etc., etc.

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